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ENG 304

Naomi

My body flies through the air and harshly hits the ground, knocking the wind out of me so much so that a loud, inhumane, guttural cough escapes me, my lungs constricting for a few moments. Willow runs up to me and meows in my face as a way to check on me. There's definitely dark magic around that place, and I have a feeling it was set here to stop me specifically from entering. I send Willow into the shabby house to find any evidence of who or what was here, and she comes out moments later carrying a letter in her mouth. I pick up my kitten as a way to protect her, unsure of what's around here.

"Hi Charlotte. I took your friend for a stroll this morning, and if you want her back, you can pay me a visit. Kisses! Genevieve." I read aloud, anger beginning to seep through my veins, and I let out a scream in frustration. Mother won't like it, but I have to cross the forest barrier and enter Vellichor. Naomi is in deep trouble, and I have to leave immediately.

This is my chance to prove to my parents that I'm not a dainty princess. I know I can get Naomi back on my own, and maybe this is the journey I need to strengthen my powers. Since Mother won't let me practice within my own kingdom, I guess I'll have to do it elsewhere. Regardless, I'm going to prove myself, and hopefully, she'll loosen the reigns on me and stop trying to run my life. She doesn't set as many regulations for the citizens of Iridescence as she does for me. I'm not her subject. I'm her daughter, and I have my own mind and abilities. It's time for her to recognize that.

I place Willow on the ground, and with my head held high, I lead the way, determined to save my best friend and prove my worth away from my title.

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“Hey Charlotte! Where are you headed off to?” Duncan, the thorn in my side, asks as he walks beside me, a smile on his face.

“Buzz off, fox. It’s none of your business.” I mutter, looking straight ahead.

He chuckles and shakes his head. “If you don’t tell me, I’m going to tattle on you.”

My pace comes to a halt as I glare at him, my green eyes piercing through him so much so that the stupid smirk on his face drops. He takes a few steps back. “You so much as look in my mother’s direction and I will turn you to stone. Don’t test me, you son of a fox-fur rug.”

“Ouch, harsh.” He says, but continues to walk along with me. “C’mon Charlotte. Can I please come? I promise you’ll need me, seeing as you’re heading in the direction of Vellichor. Just think, if you’re captured, you’ll need someone to report back.”

I think it over, and I hate to admit it, but he’s got a point. Plus, I might need to trade someone in for Naomi, and if he’s there, he’s fair game. Before I agree to it, I wack him in the snout, causing him to hiss in pain. “That’s for insinuating that I’m going to lose to Genevieve, but fine, come on and shut up.”

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“So, you threatened to turn me into stone, but your dark powers aren’t even capable of that? What’s that all about? I would think the princess of Iridescence would have powers more powerful than that!” Duncan continues to babble like an idiot, and my patience is wearing thin.

“What about your light powers? How well do those work?”

“Don’t question me.” I snarl.

“Hey, I’m just wondering. You’ve got this dandy little kitty that’s supposed to help you hone in your skills, but she’s not being utilized correctly.”

“Don’t look at her and don’t ask about her. Like I said before, it’s none of your business.”

He grins. “I’m just trying to be friendly and break the ice! No hard feelings!” I don’t respond as I continue on the path. The forest is right in front of us, and before I can step foot in it, a soft voice calls to me.

“Princess Charlotte! Up here!” I tilt my head to try to see where the voice is coming from, and I spot a small chickadee. “Are you going into the woods?” I nod. “Allow me to guide you, princess. It’s dangerous.”

“I’m okay, thank you. I’m sure it won’t be too bad.” I decline and walk in.

The bird flies closer to me, begging for me to allow her to come along, and though I open my mouth to decline once again, Duncan accepts the offer, receiving yet another glare, but it doesn’t phase him. Instead, he offers his fellow animal his shoulder. Rather than saying another word, I take Willow into my arms and walk ahead of them.

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“Hey Charlotte, Paisley says we should camp out here for the night. She knows some animals around this part that can give us shelter and look after us.” Duncan says.

I contemplate it for a moment, and I realize just how exhausted I am from the day. We’ve been walking for hours. My feet hurt, and I’m starving. Reluctantly, I agree, and Paisley guides us to the right of the path we were on, quaint cabins not too far from us. A flock of sheep come to greet us and offer us sustenance and shelter, and I thank them before ordering Duncan to fetch us

some wood for the fire. He takes Paisley along with him to do as told, leaving me among the sheep, who offer Willow and me a blanket for warmth. I smile in appreciation and sit on the grass, relieved to finally get some rest.

About fifteen minutes pass before Duncan and Paisley come back, a young man dressed in a ridiculous getup following them. I roll my eyes, knowing full well that Duncan found him and offered him company. Duncan is basically like a man claiming stray dogs followed him home, except he brings random species with him.

“Look what I found!” The fox claims triumphantly. “Can we keep him, Charlotte? Please?”

I huff, rising to get a better look at this guy. Shiny light brown hair, blue eyes, pearly white teeth. “My god, Duncan. You found a prince?” He nods furiously, as though it’s a good thing, causing me to sigh. “Who are you and where did you come from?”

The man smiles and bows. “My name is Prince Maxwell and I’m from the kingdom of Fernway. I was looking for the kingdom of Iridescence, but I’ve seemed to have lost my way.”

I smirk at the clueless look in his eyes, and when I respond that I’m the princess, he’s so relieved that I laugh a bit. He’s like a little lost puppy, and I feel obligated to watch after him. Plus, if a prince from another kingdom dies on our territory, it wouldn’t look good. When I agree to him coming along, Duncan and Paisley cheer, though I’m worried that so many people on such a dangerous journey may be more of a disadvantage than anything.

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Maxwell is really beginning to bother me with his incessant questioning, so much so that I feel that I should’ve left him behind because he has done nothing but talk, something that

Duncan has been grateful for. The lost prince has asked about my hair, why some animals talk and others don't, and he's been trying to pry into more personal information that is definitely not of his concern.

“Will you shut up for a moment?” I hiss as he continues to talk my ear off, and he grows that dumb, seemingly innocent look on his face. “Fine, I will tell you all you need to know and that is it. Don't ask me anything after.” Turning to my left for a moment, I place another piece of wood into the fire that we've made for camp tonight. It's been yet another long day of traveling, and I'm desperate for some peace and quiet. “To start off, my mission is to save my best friend Naomi from Queen Genevieve from Vellichor. If you don't know, Vellichor is the complete opposite of Iridescence. It's dark, gloomy, all that is evil to sum it up.

“I'm also going to prove to myself that I can do things on my own and hopefully grow my powers. You see, I somehow ended up with a combination of light and dark powers, and Willow is meant to help me strengthen them. Because I'm the Princess of Iridescence and we believe in all things good, we primarily have light powers, while Vellichor has more dark beings. I would lean towards the light part of my abilities, but even then my mother forbids me to practice and improve. She's afraid the darkness will overpower the light, which is a load of crap. My dad thinks so too, but when you live in a matriarchy, what the queen says goes. That's why Willow is the way she is. Her species is more animalistic, but they're neutral beings because they can be assigned to people with dark powers, light powers, or both.

“Then you have animals like Duncan and Paisley who can speak and act more like me. Because they're humanistic, they can easily integrate into society, and we in Iridescence value them and love them as our neighbors, whereas in Vellichor, as you'll see, they're mistreated and

thought of as lesser than their human counterparts, though the humans are treated awful as well.

Dang, do you live under a rock or something?” He takes a moment to process all of the information I just told him and stands there dumbfounded. I scoff and hand Willow to him.

“Make yourself useful and give her a bath in the pond over there, yeah?”

Maxwell nods, disappearing for now as I prepare dinner for us. Duncan, as always, comes over to tease me, saying how I’m too harsh on Maxwell and that he has a crush on me. I brush it off with a small smile, and in retrospect, I guess that fox isn’t so bad. He means well, but it doesn’t mean he’s not a pain.

“Charlotte, oh my god!” Maxwell yells, disrupting the relative silence of the forest as he runs up to me with Willow in his arms, blood splattered on his clothes. My eyes grow wide as I realize it’s coming from my kitten.

“What did you do?!” I scream at him and take her from him, tears welling in my eyes.

“T-there were some wolves, a-and I tried my best, but they got her. I’m so sorry.”

My anger rises as I stare at him in disbelief, my jaw open in shock. “Can you not do anything right?! I asked you to do one simple task, and this happens! I should’ve left you out in the woods to die!”

I run off by myself, praying that I can figure out a solution to this. If my powers were stronger, I could potentially heal her. Beings with light powers have been known to do such a thing, but I can’t. I’m not strong enough. The best I can do is freeze her in this state, placing her in a sort of unconsciousness, but there’s no guarantee how long that will last with my weak abilities, and I may never get her back. My legs give way beneath me, and I collapse onto the

grass, Willow's fragile body pressed to my chest as I begin to sob at the thought of losing her. She's been my best friend since I was born, and a world without her is inconceivable to me.

If Duncan didn't invite that good-for-nothing, stupid boy on this trip, this would've never happened. This entire mission has been a complete bust from the start. I wish they would all leave me alone and disappear because nothing has been going as planned. All that they've done is annoy me and unnecessarily follow me like a pack of idiots. I could've done this on my own, but now, I feel responsible for them. I dragged them further into the forest, so now I'm stuck with them. This is why I do what I need to alone. People and animals get in the way of goals, and I hate that I'm in this predicament.

Branches crack and leaves crunch, signaling that someone is approaching, and I look up, about to tell whoever it is to go away, but I see none other than my mother, Paisley and Maxwell behind her. Although at first I assumed she would be upset with me, her eyes are soft, apologetic, and without a word between us, she takes Willow and cradles her like a baby, and suddenly, she's healed, her eyes open and her head moving to and fro as she becomes accustomed to her surroundings. She gazes at me momentarily, leaping out of my mother's arms and into mine. I can't help but to now cry out of happiness, taking time to myself to process everything before rising off the ground.

"Can you guys go away so I can talk to my mother?" I speak to the two behind her, and she scoffs.

"Charlotte." My mother sternly says, her eyebrows furrowed. She turns to Paisley and Duncan, saying, "Thank you so much. You two are very sweet. I'm sorry for my daughter's rudeness. She's not accustomed to help, even when she knows full well that she needs it." They

nod and smile before turning to leave us be, my mother sighing and ordering me to sit on the grass.

“You have to understand that I had to leave without telling you.” I say.

“I know, and it’s my fault.” She responds, taking me by surprise. “Charlotte, did you know Genevieve and I used to be best friends?” I shake my head furiously, shocked by her this new information. “Before her mother taught her the potential of her powers, she and I were like you and Naomi. We did absolutely everything together, and I thought we would be like that forever.” My mother looks off into the distance, a sad silence looming over us, and she continues in a softer voice than previously. “The reason I kept you from using your magic is because I know the effects that the darkness can have on a person. It’s not just magical powers, Charlotte. It’s dangerous and can affect you mentally, and I don’t want to lose you to that, but if I keep you away from it rather than teaching you about it, you could get hurt.

“I realize that you’re capable of controlling yourself, but there’s always that chance. You’ll always be my little girl no matter how old you are, and I only want the best for you. I love you, and it’s time I allow you to become your own person. You become more determined each day to pave your own way, and it’s time I stop restricting you. Not knowing where you were, and then finding out you were here terrified me, and I never want something like this to happen again. I know you want to get to Naomi as soon as possible, but let me teach you what you really need to know. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Wait, so you’re not coming with me?”

She shakes her head and smiles, taking my hand into hers. “You need to do this for yourself, and without any interferences.”

A huge grin spreads on my face as I hug her tightly. “Thanks mom, and I’m sorry for running off.”

Her hand gently caresses my cheek, a warm expression on her face. “You have been, and will always be, such a stubborn girl, but I admire that about you. You never give up on your goals no matter how crazy they can be.” She stands, pulling me up with her. “Come on. We have a lot to go over.”

As I walk behind her, a question pops into my head. “Uh, mom, why were you in the woods at this time?”

Her body completely halts and she turns around as she fiddles with her hands, a guilty look on her face. “Well, I may have another secret.” I cross my arms as I await her news. “I’m actually just like you, and I come out here every now and again to release some steam. Dark magic has its perks, but if I utilize it, I always stay away from Iridescence. Nobody knows apart from your father and Paisley. She definitely knows the ins and outs of this forest, and she’s watched me on many occasions to keep me company. Such a sweet little thing.

“Anyway, you need to keep quiet about this entire thing. I don’t think it’ll cause an uproar among the citizens in Iridescence, but it’s something I’ve kept with me since birth.”

I shrug and chuckle, her facial features scrunching in confusion. “I knew you were hiding something, so it’s cool. Now you can teach me more!” She shakes her head and grabs my hand, leading me further into the forest.

“Good luck my love, and please ensure that you take care of your friends.” My mom says as she kisses my cheek. “You’re going to do great. I know it.” I smile and give her one last tight hug, thanking her for everything.

“Goodbye Queen Valentina!” The group shouts happily and waves to her as she walks away, and once she’s out of sight, I turn to all of them, their eyes staring at me expectantly.

“Um, I just wanted to apologize for everything. I’ve been really awful to all of you, but overall, I’m grateful for the company. I don’t know where I would be right now if it weren’t for you guys, so thank you.”

Paisley flies to me, and I cup my hands for her to land within them. “You’re welcome, princess. We’re happy to assist you.”

“Does this means we’re best friends now?” Duncan asks as he happily skips over to me, his arms around my shoulders.

“I suppose so.” I giggle, laughing at his triumphant dance. He takes Paisley, placing her on his head, and they continue to walk towards Vellichor, both of them yelling, “Onwards!”

Maxwell begins to follow, but I grab his wrist to stop him. His blue eyes gaze softly at me, a small smile on his face. “I’m so sorry for everything I said to you. It wasn’t your fault that Willow got hurt, and for me to expect you to guard her the way I did against such creatures was unfair. You don’t know the lands like I do, and Willow is my responsibility. But thank you for what you did to help her and me. My mother told me you were hysterical when Paisley led you to her.”

“You were upset. I understand why you reacted the way you did, but I’m glad it all worked out.” A moment of silence passes before he leans in to kiss my forehead, a light blush

rising to me cheeks. “No hard feelings, princess.” And with that, he jogs to catch up to Duncan and Paisley.

“Ugh, *boys*.” I whisper to my kitten and shake my head, a small grin on my face as we both hurry to catch up to the group.

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Vellichor is even filthier than I remember, and the people continue to become more vile. Maxwell barely glanced at a woman and she spit in his face, and then someone proceeded to throw rotten food at me, telling me to leave immediately or my kingdom would regret it. Surprisingly, Duncan has remained silent, and I know he and Paisley are afraid of this place. I keep a firm grasp on his hand as we weave through the dirt-infested cobblestone streets, passing various booths that claim to be legitimate businesses, random items on display for purchase for ridiculous prices. I ignore the calls to me by various humans and animals, as I’m eager to get to the castle. Once we get closer, I see a large metal gate restricting entry, an obnoxiously sized lock hanging in the middle. Maxwell begins to question how we’re going to get through, and before he can finish his inquiry, I use the heat force my mother aided me in strengthening to cut through the metal.

“And who said light powers couldn’t be as powerful as dark? I bet they can’t do that!” I say triumphantly, continuing to follow the pathway; however, the relative ease of the journey so far comes to a halt when it begins to hail, hard chunks of ice pelting us. We rush to the door of the front entryway of the castle, the brick of the building thankfully shielding us.

Yet another giant lock is found, though before I can repeat the same process as before, it unlocks and drops onto the ground, the doors creaking open to reveal a pitch black room. I file

everyone in a single line to follow me, though I entrust Duncan to carry Willow, and form a small orb of bright yellow light to help guide us. It floats above our heads as we venture further in, eventually ascending the steps to the highest point of the tower, where I know Genevieve is keeping Naomi. We find them both in what is possibly the smallest room of the tower, a cage keeping Naomi captive, and it isn't even big enough to allow her to stand. She's sat with her knees to her chest while Genevieve is busy reading on a small black couch, the fabric torn, color faded, and stuffing beginning to fall out.

"I was beginning to get a little bored, sweetheart, but this is fabulous! I definitely didn't expect you to bring company!" Genevieve says with a devious smile on her face, her voice smooth, hypnotizing almost. She's absolutely breathtaking, always has been despite her evil nature. Her hair flows as she stands and walks closer to me, her movements so gracious that I wonder how someone so seemingly elegant could live in a dump like this. Her hand reaches out to me to grab my jaw, her touch gentle. "You're so grown up, Charlotte. I haven't seen you in person in ages. The images of you don't do you any justice."

I swat her hand away from my face and keep a serious look. "I'm not your friend, so stop acting like it. What will it take for me to get Naomi back so I can go back to my kingdom?"

She smirks, brushing my hair behind my ear. "Now why would I allow my daughter to escape from me in such a manner?" Her laugh causes me to realize that I've been staring at her absolutely dumbfounded for the past few seconds. "She didn't tell you, did she?"

"I, what? No." I mumble and turn to my best friend, a guilty expression written on her face. "Naomi?"

“Charlotte, I’m sorry.” She says, her voice laced with agony and her eyes pleading for me to not be so quick to judge.

“You’re lying, right?” She shakes her head furiously, a tear rolling down her cheek. “Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“I was afraid that you wouldn’t want to be my friend anymore.” At this point, I begin to cry, feeling so betrayed that I want to run away and forget this all happened. But I don’t. I want an explanation, and I want it now.

“You should know me better than that, Naomi. I love you no matter what. How could you think that I would judge you for something you have no control over?”

“You always talk badly about her, and it’s never been a point of dispute because I’m not fond of her either, but if anyone else overheard that conversation, what would they think? What would the kingdom do if they found out?”

“NOTHING!” I yell at her, her body jumping in shock. “You think so lowly of me that you’d believe I’d let anything happen to you? I’ve been looking after you since we were young because I’ve known how detached your parents are to you. Now it all makes sense. It’s all been a huge lie.”

“Charlotte, please.” Naomi begs, shaking the bars of the cage.

Maxwell comforts me as I incessantly cry, and although I’m extremely upset, I manage to ask, “What do you want Naomi?”

“I want to go home.” She croaks, both of us in the same fragile state.

I wipe my tears away with my sleeve and face Genevieve, the smirk still present on her features, anger rising within me. “Let her go.”

She scoffs and crosses her arms. “Do you expect me to just hand her over? What’s the fun in that?”

My eyes look straight into hers as I say, “*We don’t have to be adversaries because of our powers. We can live in harmony and be like we were before. Nothing should come between us.*”

A flash of emotion appears in her eyes, though I’m unsure if it’s sadness, frustration, or something else. She diverts her gaze for a moment before she takes a few steps back, her entire demeanor beginning to falter.

“All you ever want to do is hurt me.” Genevieve whispers.

“My mother misses you.” I respond. “*Best friends forever in the lands that say never.*”

“TAKE HER!” She screams, unlocking the door before she harshly pushes Naomi towards us. Her body runs into mine with great force, and she hugs me tightly, but I never look away from Genevieve.

“Maxwell, please take everyone outside and wait for me at the entrance.” I say, creating another orb of light to follow them out. Genevieve’s back is turned to me when we’re left alone, a sad silence filling the room. This is what I intended to do, but I didn’t think she’d take my mother’s words from so long ago this hard. Frankly, I didn’t know she was capable of such great emotion, but to see it causes me to feel sympathy for her. “We don’t hate you.”

She pathetically chuckles and shakes her head. “I said all you ever do is hurt me, but I-I hurt you too. You’ve never accepted me.”

“You’ve never allowed us to accept you, Genevieve. You lock yourself in this tower, you and your citizens play mean tricks on us, you kidnap our people. How are we supposed to build a good rapport with that?”

“I’m sorry.” I practically collapse at that statement. When does anyone ever hear an apology from someone they perceived as evil? “Does your mom really still think about me?”

I nod. “All the time.”

She faces me one last time, a teary smile taking me by surprise. “She’s always been a sore spot for me.” A sigh escapes her as she comes closer. “Will you please tell her I miss her as well?”

“Of course, and if you promise to stop these kidnappings and dirty tricks, you’re always welcome to visit.”

“Thank you.” Her arms extend to me for a hug. I take her into a cautious one, but she doesn’t harm me, so I hold her that much tighter, realizing that she’s been performing such deeds for attention, and my heart goes out to her.

“I hope this means we can start anew.” I say.

“I hope so too.” She gives me a genuine grin, causing me to do the same. “I’m sorry for all of this. I hope you have a safe journey back.”

“I appreciate it. Please come visit your daughter when you can.” I say my goodbyes and head down to the group, leading the way with a bit of distance ahead of them so I can overthink everything.

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“Charlotte.” Naomi speaks up as soon as we reach her home. I gaze at her as I wait for her to say something else. “Are we okay?”

I crack a smile and take her into a firm embrace. “Of course we are. I’m sorry I yelled at you. I can appreciate where you were coming from, but from now on, no more secrets. I love you for you.”

“I love you too. Thank you for everything.” She bids farewell to all of us before yelling, “See you tomorrow!”

“So, what about us?” Maxwell inquires.

I turn to him and laugh. “What *about* us?”

“Nothing.” He chuckles. “How’d you do that back there?”

“My mother told me about their past, and since dark magic is very psychological, I knew that she would be highly receptive to what my mother had said to her all those years back.”

“Clever.” He responds as we walk in the direction of the castle of Iridescence, Willow in his arms.

“What does ‘best friends forever in the lands that say never’ mean?” Paisley asks.

“Since Iridescence and Vellichor have always been rivals, it’s been pretty taboo to befriend people from either kingdom. My mom and Genevieve somehow met in the woods one day and began a friendship from there. They used to meet in the forest every day since it’s a neutral zone between the kingdoms and say that to each other before they would go home.”

“And why did they stop?” Duncan inquires.

“Genevieve strengthened her powers, and she told my mom that they had to stop because she feared that it could be dangerous for not only them, but for both kingdoms, if they kept meeting. She was responsible for more of the kingdom’s problems since she was older, and she

had to start looking out for Vellichor more than she had previously. They split ways and haven't mended the relationship since."

Paisley lands on my shoulder, embedding herself within my hair. "That won't happen to us, right Charlotte? We're going to be friends from now on."

"Come here you two oafs." I say to Duncan and Maxwell, wrapping an arm around each of them. "We'll always have each other from now on."

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"Maxwell, close the curtains!" I groan and lift my head, annoyed that I've been awakened. Willow looks around too, sleep still apparent in her eyes. He rushes over to me, already dressed for the day, helping me from my bed to stand on the ground, placing a soft kiss on my forehead, a huge smile on my face.

It's been about a year since our journey to save Naomi, and things have been amazing. Paisley and Duncan now live in the castle with my family, and they've become two of my best friends. They're lively, witty, lovely all around. Maxwell was able to solidify trade relations between Fernway and Iridescence, his original mission, and has become my boyfriend in the process. He is *so* lucky, if I do say so myself.

Naomi and I are now stronger than ever, and so are her and Genevieve. They meet every week in the forest for a picnic and to catch up on everything going on. As for my mother and Genevieve, they've begun to reestablish their friendship and improve the relationship between Iridescence and Vellichor, and though it's been a bit difficult, there are many benefits to it.

"Breakfast is ready, so get dressed and come downstairs. Naomi's here, and Genevieve is supposed to come to discuss some political topics with your mother and my mother."

“Perfect. I’ll be down in a few minutes. Take Willow with you please.” He nods, kisses my hand, and grabs my kitten before exiting my room. I sigh, feeling absolute contentment fill my body. I’ve never been happier, and I’m so fortunate to have what I do.