

I DON'T WANT TO ALARM ANYONE, BUT
THERE'S AN ELF AT BAGGAGE CLAIM

THE GUY WAS probably a painter. Possibly a drummer.

College age and wearing all black, he'd been the unique focus of my thousand-hour red-eye. My inflight boyfriend. It was a torrid, imaginary romance. We'd gone on at least a dozen dates and told adorable anecdotes to our future children about how their parents met a few miles in the air.

Now we were no longer separated by two Aer Lingus seats. We were shoulder to shoulder, dazedly watching the baggage belt spin. *Just say hi. Ask him something.*

I hugged the neck of my guitar case. "Do you know the time?"

He checked a large, silver watch. "Half twelve."

"What?" I blurted. The bags began to emerge, and I was suddenly under new pressure to break the ice before we parted ways. After all, an entire transatlantic daydream

depended on it. “Is that six? Eleven thirty? I’m so jet-lagged it could be either.”

“Twelve thirty.” His Irish accent made his words feel like lyrics to a decent song.

“Yeah, that doesn’t make sense. Half of twelve is six.” I smiled.

“Americans,” he muttered with a snicker.

And he continued snickering as he reached for a suitcase, leaving me with the unparalleled awkwardness of being embarrassed by and disappointed in a complete stranger. I’d mentally dumped him four exotic ways—my favorite involving a baseball stadium video screen—by the time my little brother came running back from the bathroom.

“Iris!” Ryder yelled. “I peed for like two whole minutes. I should’ve timed it!”

The baggage claim crowd parted for him—people tend to do that when someone’s yelling about their urine. Now I really felt like a gross American. *Thanks, Ireland. We’re off to a great start.*

“Eleven days,” I murmured. “Only eleven days.”

Ryder showed no sign of jet lag. He wrestled a foam fantasy axe out of his backpack, spilling weapons everywhere. He then engaged imaginary opponents in fierce battle while the people from our flight continued to back away. My ex-in-flight boyfriend even gave him a dirty look—before giving me a dirtier look.

“I’m not his mom, you know,” I said as I collected Ryder’s weapons off the floor.

A well-meaning Irish granny stepped up. “Is this your first time in Ireland?” she asked Ryder, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder. My brother nodded and squirmed. I checked my desire to tell her that, in America, we don’t touch kids we don’t know, but I didn’t want to call more attention to our swiftly amassing cultural differences. “Are you going to see the Giant’s Causeway? Or the Cliffs of Moher?”

“No,” Ryder said, breaking free from her hold. “We get to meet famous people and help out on set and probably even get bit roles.”

“No bit roles, Ry. You know that,” I said.

McGranny looked to me for an explanation. I zipped up Ryder’s backpack and said it fast. “He means the adaptation for *Elementia*. They’re filming here for the next two weeks. We’ve been invited to...” What were we supposed to do? “Watch, I guess.”

“Our grandma wrote that book!” Ryder said so loud we now had an even larger audience. Everyone who’d been groggily waiting to claim their luggage had tuned in.

“Excuse me?” My ex-love was back in the picture, not snickering this time. “Did you say your grandmother was the author M. E. Thorne?” The spark in his eyes seemed desperate to rekindle our imaginary flame.

Get out of your own head, Iris.

“Yeah,” I managed.

“Have I got something to show you.” He started to take off his shirt.

“Oh, for the love of...” I whispered, staring down at my red Chucks.

“Look!” Ryder proclaimed. “Iris, look! He’s got the map of Elementia on his ribs!”

I had to peek. It was an awfully big map. Alas, my curiosity was rewarded by a rich paleness smattered in black chest hair.

He put his shirt back down and smiled, but I kept hearing the way he’d grumbled *Americans*. “So are you excited about the film adaptation?” he asked. “Are you having a hand in its development? How do you feel about them changing the ages of the characters?”

I braided my hair back and said nothing, reminded once again of my life’s golden rule. People usually treated me one of two ways. One: like I was M. E. Thorne’s granddaughter, gifted with an otherworldly glow. Two: no one. I’d give anything for a third option.

“This is all you talk about, isn’t it?” he continued. “You’ve probably been reading your grandma’s books since you were a kid. I discovered them a few years back. Then again, I bet you can’t say anything because of the movies. Top-secret insider information, right?”

I chewed on my response. The gristle of this fantasy talk would not go down. Everyone assumed I’d be over the moon

about the adaptation, but it meant the story's fandom would triple. Quadruple. Soon everyone would revise their interest in me, just like this guy.

"Ryder, see if that's our bag," I said, moving us to the other side of the carousel. When I had my back to everyone from our flight, I squeezed my eyes, a little scream coming up from deep inside.

"You okay, Iris?" Ryder put a hand on my shoulder. I opened my eyes. Not his hand—it was his foam dwarf axe. At least his little-kid expression was earnest.

"I'm fine." I rested my forehead on the top of my guitar case. I knew better than to check out when I was on Ryder duty, but I couldn't help it. One moment later, my brother was lunging for his luggage, and the next, he was on the carousel, disappearing through the plastic hanging strips and into the bowels of Shannon Airport. "Hey!" I yelled. "Ryder!" Fear slapped me awake, and I almost crawled through the plastic strips after him. "Hey!"

"Need some help, then?"

I turned toward a new Irish voice and almost fell over. "Oh no."

The boy had elf ears. Honest to God, pointy and flexed into his hairline elf ears.

"Oh no?" he returned, his eyebrows sky-high.

"What're you... What *are* you?"

"I'm an elf," he said as casually as if he were telling me he

was an art major. “I’m here to give you a lift.” He held up a printed sign that read THORNE.

“Put that down. These people are already too curious.” I grabbed the paper and balled it. “And if you’re here to help, solve that equation.” I pointed to the baggage exit. “One brother went in. No brothers are coming back out. He’s probably on the runway by now.”

“Ye of little faith,” Elf Ears said, crossing his arms. “He’ll pop back through in a moment.” He leaned over conspiratorially. “It’s a circle, you know.”

I couldn’t believe that a stranger with artificial ears was “ye of little faith”-ing me. “What if security catches him? In the United States, the TSA confiscates firstborns for this kind of thing.”

On cue, Ryder came back through the plastic strips, sitting on my duffel and wearing my sunglasses he’d pillaged from the outer pocket. He knew he was in trouble, and yet he grinned. Then he saw the guy beside me, and his mouth dropped open. Ryder jumped down and ran over, leaving me to fetch both of our bags from the carousel.

By the time I’d returned, Ryder’s face was a full moon of excitement. “Iris. This is Nolan. *Nolan.*”

Nolan held out his hand as though we hadn’t previously met, i.e., argued. “It’s Eamon. Eamon O’Brien.”

I dropped Ryder’s bag to shake Eamon’s hand. “What a name. Did you spring from the roots of Ireland itself?”

I had to hand it to him—he didn’t flinch.

“And you’re Iris Thorne. Nothing to slag there, right?”

Ryder pulled on my shirt, revealing way too much of my bra, while hissing, “It’s Nolan.”

I grabbed his hand and yanked up my neckline. “Stop it or I’ll snap your dwarf axe over my knee.” I plucked my sunglasses off Ryder’s face and put them on in time to catch quite possibly the dirtiest look an elf has ever given a human. “Oh, come on. I don’t really break his toys. And how come there are three of us, but I’m carrying all the bags?”

“It’s not a toy,” Ryder snipped. “It’s a costume replica.”

Eamon continued to glare, proving his eyes weren’t blue but a crystal color that felt digitally enhanced. No wonder he’d been cast as the famous elf in Grandma Mae’s books. Nolan—Eamon—whatever his name was threw the strap of my huge duffel over his shoulder and tried to take my guitar.

“Don’t even think about it,” Ryder said for me. “She’s married to that thing.”

“Is that legal in America these days? Do you share health care?”

I stuck out my tongue, and Eamon grinned wildly, which encouraged me to put my tongue away and wonder how he’d reduced me to Ryder’s maturity level in a matter of minutes.

We passed under the green banner of *NOTHING TO DECLARE*, and I tried some light conversation. “So, if you’re one of the actors, why are you doing airport pickups?”

“I volunteered. I’m a huge fan.”

Good Lord.

“Hey, I read about you,” Ryder said. “This is your very first movie!”

I couldn’t help myself. “Then how’d you get the role?”

“That’s a fine story. I love *Elementia*. It’s in my blood. I first read it with my mam when I was, oh, about this high.” He held his hand to Ryder’s head, making my brother beam. “When they announced the movie and open casting, Mam and I decided to dream big. We made an audition video in a wooded bit on Saint Stephen’s Green.”

“Elijah Wood did that to become Frodo,” Ryder said.

“Right, right.” He knocked Ryder’s shoulder, best friends already. “I thought, if it worked for Elijah, why can’t it work with me?”

“Because Elijah Wood had an established film career before he did that,” I muttered.

“What was that?” Eamon asked.

“Nothing.” I knew where this story was going. Without a doubt, it would conclude with “then I met the grandchildren of M. E. Thorne and it was the most magical thing to ever happen to me.”

Eamon continued. “Lo and behold, I’m cast as Nolan. And today I’m getting fit for my ears when Cate Collins, wonder director, needs someone to pick up M. E. Thorne’s grandchildren. I volunteered, quick as light.” Eamon shifted the bag on

his shoulder and glanced at me. “This is when I meet a tiny, axe-wielding hero and his mountain troll of a guardian.”

My guitar case slipped out of my hand, banging hollowly on the ground. “What the...”

Ryder’s smile was wider than both of the hands he used to cover it.

“Pardon that.” Eamon winked at me—the sassiest thing I’d ever seen a guy manage. “I’m prone to descriptive exaggeration, me springing outta the roots of Ireland and all.”

I blushed, an odd mixture of offended and ashamed.

“Iris Thorne!” an unfamiliar voice yelled from behind.

I turned, my pulse turning into a drum. Just like there were two ways people treated me, there were two kinds of Elementia fans: the ones who loved the trilogy—and the ones who’d reconstructed their lives for it. The latter group called themselves *Thornians*. They wrote letters to my family. They knew my birthday.

And one of them tried to abduct Ryder when he was six.

I was sort of relieved to see it was my ex-in-flight boyfriend, the newly redubbed Mr. Nerdy Torso Tattoo, jogging over. “How do you know my name?” I asked, my voice breaking a little as I put out an arm to keep him from getting too close to Ryder.

“Your brother was yelling it. I didn’t even know M. E. Thorne had young grandkids.”

I relaxed slightly. “I’m not that young.”

“I’m crossing my fingers you’re eighteen.” The guy leaned close with flirtatious wickedness, reminding me of what had drawn my attention to him during the flight. Lanky gorgeousness. The glasses. Blue eyes. Dark, tight swirls of hair. He rested a long-fingered hand on the top of my guitar case. Definitely musician’s fingers. Also, it was suddenly quite obvious that I’d been wrong; he was *well* beyond college age.

Earth to Iris. Walk away, Iris.

“I’m...seventeen.” I stepped back, oddly relieved to bump into Eamon. “Have to go.”

The guy pulled out his wallet and handed me a business card. “Shoot me a message around your birthday. I’ll take you out, and we can talk about the movie, or the books, if you prefer.”

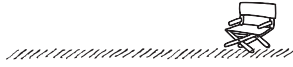
Neither, thank you. “I live in LA.”

“I’ll make the trip.” He smiled at the person he thought was me. He walked away. And I hated M. E. Thorne more than usual, which, to be honest, was already a lot.

We walked toward the parking lot, and I kept my head down.

“You work fast, Lady Iris,” Eamon said, low enough that Ryder couldn’t hear.

“No way,” I muttered back. “That guy has the hots for my dead grandma.” He glanced at me, concerned. “I’m fine,” I added, hoping I looked annoyed—bold and unflappable—but from the way his expression fell, I think maybe my sad was showing.



WHAT DO YOU MEAN "WE'RE GETTING ON A BOAT?"

EAMON STUFFED MY duffel into the hatchback trunk of the smallest vehicle I've ever seen. Its color was rust red, by which I mean that the rust was eating all the red. It also only had two doors.

"We're not going to fit in there." I glanced around the parking lot filled with cars exactly like the one before me. The big, shiny SUVs I was used to were nowhere to be seen.

"Sure you are." Eamon propped the front seat forward so Ryder could scurry into the back. He shoved Ryder's bag in too, smooshing my brother against the far side.

Ryder's delight was palpable. "Hey! These seats are buckets!"

"Did my dad tell you to pick me up in this?" I asked.

Eamon stopped shoving to peer at me. "What would I have to do with your da?"

Good question. I glanced at my watch, exhaustedly disoriented. It was 4:46 a.m. back in LA. In a few hours, the sun would wake up, brilliant and hot. In Ireland, the clouds were cement. Thick and gray. Or grey. Whichever of those words means the color plus the emotion. And it was chilly. Which meant I'd completely bungled my packing. "I... My dad likes to mess with me."

Ryder craned his head out the passenger window. "Dad made us fly coach. He said it was good for us. He calls Iris 'Jaded Iris' because she acts so old."

"That's not very kind," Eamon said.

"Says the guy who called me a mountain troll," I snapped. "And what do you plan on doing with Annie?"

"Say, who?"

"Her guitar!" Ryder yelled.

"Your guitar is called Annie? That's fairly cute." He smiled, and part of me was tempted to smile back. I told that part to sit down and don't even think about it. Instead, I focused on his scrappy hair—I mean, really, it was the scrappiest dirty-blond argument of a hairstyle I'd ever seen. At least it flopped over his elf ears in a way that slightly camouflaged their weirdness.

Eamon held up some rope. "Let's tie Annie to the roof."

"Are you insane?" I cried out.

He laughed, slammed the trunk, and held open the driver's side door, which was actually the passenger door, because the car was inverted. "Annie'll have to ride on your lap."

I folded myself in and pulled my guitar after me. “Eleven days,” I murmured, Annie pressed between my knees, my chin propped on the top of her case. “Ten after today.”

Eamon’s driving was all jerky gear adjustments on the serpentine, narrow roads, a problem exacerbated by Ryder’s endless questions. Within minutes, I’d found out Eamon was eighteen, grew up in Dublin, and wasn’t planning on going to college in the fall. Huh.

“So what are you going to do? For money and stuff?” I asked.

“Dunno,” he said. “I’ll figure it out when I get there.”

Double huh. “Are teenagers allowed to do that here? In America, it’s like, ‘You’re going straight to college, young lady, or you’ll fail out of life.’”

Eamon laughed. “That’s massive stupid. How’re you supposed to know what you want to do as fast as that?”

I bristled at his use of “massive stupid,” even if he seemed to be using both words differently—and even if he was right.

After singing the praises of every cow, sheep, and half-crumbled stone tower, Ryder started snoring. I craned my neck to look back at him. He was sweet and fragile when he was asleep, but even then, I could hear him chirping *Jaded Iris*. To be honest, I was feeling bad about being a giant grump. That’s the thing about negativity—it gives you control and makes you ugly in one fell swoop. By that logic, my father was the ugliest, most powerful man in California.

And also the real reason I was crammed into this clown car.

“I want you to take Ryder on that Hollywood excursion to Ireland,” my dad had said only a week ago, as if he were asking me to make dinner instead of cross the Atlantic. He didn’t even bother to look up from his laptop. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“But you told Cate Collins we wouldn’t be part of her movie,” I said, stunned. “You swore at her.”

“Yes, well, she won’t stop calling, and your brother won’t stop asking. Today I received a written notice that he’d like to trade”—my dad grabbed a piece of paper and read—“five birthdays and Christmases for the trip to see the *Elementia* filming.” He dropped the paper. “Also his therapist thinks it’s a great idea. I’m overruled.”

I was speechless. Particularly because my dad had spent the last seventeen years listing reasons why I should hate the nerd fantasy written by his mother and the last year monologuing about how much he loathed the film adaptation that was in development.

“I’m serious, Iris,” he said through my shocked silence. “My book is overdue to my editor, your mom is deep in her writing, and I can’t deal right now.”

“Ah, the truth comes out,” I muttered.

“Take him. Have one of those once-in-a-lifetime experiences. But no alcohol or flirting. Your job is to watch your brother.”

“Watch Ryder? What’ll that be like?” I snipped sarcastically. “However will I manage?”

“Don’t give me that crap. Make the arrangements.”

I took a deep breath. He was asking me to do something huge; I was going to ask for something huge in return. And I was ready. “I want to access my trust fund when I’m eighteen instead of twenty-five. I know you can change that.”

My father finally looked up from his screen. “That money is purpose money. Tell me, Jaded Iris, do you have a purpose?”

“Yes.” I did my best to sound as certain as he did. “I want to buy recording software and equipment. For my songs.”

“Are you going to play for me?”

I paused. “No.”

“Well then, I can’t help you. If you’re not ready to let me hear you play, you’re not ready to record. I’m not letting you turn into one of those entitled, skip-the-hard-work-to-get-to-the-top, ‘oh look at me, I’m a YouTube sensation’ teenagers.”

“Then I’m not taking him.” I’d backed up, nearly out of his office before he replied.

“Speaking of your trust fund, Iris, you should thank Cate Collins. *In person*. Grandma Mae’s book sales, a.k.a. the funds in your trust, are growing exponentially because of those films. Once you’re done with college and find a real purpose, you can live however you want. Your kids can live however they want. Your grandkids can live however they want.” He said that like it was a bad thing. Like it’d been a terrible idea for

him to live however he wanted: writing ill-received detective novels all day and night in the darkest room in the house.

“Maybe I need money to help me find my purpose,” I’d argued.

“I’ll think about it,” he said, “if you bring Ryder there and back again. *Safely*.” He’d waved me away, leaving me to wonder if this was a real deal we’d made.

Eamon’s tiny car shuddered while climbing a hill. I managed to reach my backpack tucked at my feet and pulled out my journal. I scribbled a few lyrics before I realized that Eamon was trying to read them. “Hey, *Shannara Chronicles!* Watch the road!”

He jerked the car back to the left. “You’re a writer?”

“No.”

“I hear your dad’s a writer. Never read his stuff though.”

“That puts you in the category of most human beings,” I said. He looked at me askance. “No one reads his books, but he keeps getting contracts because of his last name.”

“Ah, the Thorne legacy.”

I frowned. “Everyone compares his writing to my grandmother’s, even though it’s not the same genre. He tried to publish with a pseudonym, but that left him invisible.”

Eamon tapped Annie’s case. “Are you going to ride the Thorne name into being a rock star then? Sold out concerts and platinum records?”

This boy had a lot to learn.

“Mind, I don’t blame you. Everyone wants to be Taylor Swift. *I* wouldn’t mind being Taylor Swift.” He started singing “Bad Blood” in an unfortunately decent voice.

“Stop.”

He grinned, and I dared to trust him with the truth.

“I’m a songwriter.” There was something tricky about that sentence. Like the person I was saying it to might disagree—and maybe they’d be right.

“Can I hear a song?”

“No!” I was starting to feel nauseous, and it wasn’t the windy roads. “I write songs for other people to play and sing.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Says the guy who gets paid to read lines someone else wrote.”

“Touché, love.” He shrugged, crystal eyes on the road. I knew people said things like that here, but it didn’t make it any less strange.

The horizon was a patchwork of greens sewed up with zig-zagging stone walls. It was pretty but rural. “So where are we going? And when do we get to a hotel with beds and showers?”

“How many showers does one young Los Angelino like yourself need?” His comebacks had amazing speed, but I gave him a side-eye instead of a compliment. “My orders are to bring you to Doolin, and then onto the ferry to Inishmore, where they’re filming this week.”

“Ferry?”

“It’s grand. And wait till you see the set. It’ll steal your breath.”

“I like breathing.”

Ryder’s face popped up between the front seats, gleefully woken by the sounds of my horror, no doubt. “We’re going on set? Today? In a boat?”

“Well, no,” Eamon said, surprising me. “We’re only going if your sister is up to it. After all, it’s been a long night for both of you.”

“Hotel,” I said.

Ryder wriggled around the passenger seat, breathing in my ear. “Please, oh please, Iris? I will sit so still and not do a single thing I’m not supposed to.”

I checked my brother’s eyes for sincerity. He was eight now, and yet he still looked like the six-year-old who’d started screaming from the other side of the playground—a man’s arm around his waist, dragging him toward a van. I’d never run so fast. I’d never been so scared.

I rubbed at the raised hair on my arms. Two years later, and I still got chills, which were always followed by my dad’s voice in my head saying, *That’s cliché description, Iris.*

Ryder’s baby dragon breath was all over me—stale ketchup and bologna.

“You don’t leave my side,” I said. “Promise?” He nodded; I wasn’t the only one who remembered every detail of what had happened that day.



Hours later, the frigid Atlantic sprayed my face every time the ferry crested a swell. Eamon and Ryder were overjoyed, skittering across the deck together, already brothers in mischief. At least the cement sky had cracked apart to reveal a striking blue.

“Cate reserved this vessel for the entire shoot. The captain said he’d take us ’round to see the filming,” Eamon yelled over the engines. “Then we’ll dock and meet up with the crew.” I held the rail and tried not to breathe the dank mold smell of the ancient life preserver around my neck just as Ryder cried out, pointing at a great cliff wall topped by an ancient stone formation. “Dun Aengus,” Eamon yelled. “It’s a prehistoric fort dating back to the Iron Age.”

But I wasn’t looking at the ruin.

On top of the cliff, I squinted at a few dozen crew members, towers of equipment, a camera on a crane, and a woman wearing what can only be described as a Gandalf bathrobe. At the water level, a girl with massive hair gripped the sides of an old-world rowboat. It was tethered by bright-green ropes to a high-tech raft that ran its motor hard to keep the waves from pressing all of them into the rock wall. A helicopter buzzed overhead, and I whipped my head back to see a cameraman and his equipment leaning out of the open side door.

“That’s so dangerous,” I breathed.

“This will be the remains of Manifest,” Eamon explained with a mischievous grin that actually made him look like an elf. “Imagine the CGI! There will be pieces of fallen towers and castles jutting up from the water like a watery graveyard of a city.” Eamon pointed to the Gandalf woman atop the cliff. “And that’s Maedina!”

“Who?” I yelled over the sound of the circling helicopter.

“What?” he yelled back.

“You’re wasting your time, Nolan,” Ryder said, most of his head swallowed by his life preserver. “Iris won’t read the books. She doesn’t know about any of it.”

“No, serious?” he asked, crystal eyes wide and mouth gaping.

“Geez, I don’t have cancer,” I shouted. “I’m just not into fantasy.”

“But your grandma—”

“Only met her once. She died when I was eight.”

“But—” Eamon cut himself off this time, still peering at me like I’d told him I had two months to live. The ferry pulled away from the raucous shooting, and the thundering ferry engines no longer felt loud enough to fill the quiet.

I turned to the rail, gripping the biting cold metal and trying not to look back at the chaos of the filming, trying to stop the truth that now buzzed in my mind like that helicopter.

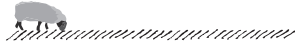
This wasn’t going to be eleven days.

This movie was going to alter the rest of my life.

I now understood what had gotten my dad so fiery when we had first met with Cate Collins. Movies blew stories up. There would be posters, sequels, GIFs. Merchandise! Hot Topic would produce a trail mix of Thornian crap overnight. And that's if the movies were well received.

What if they were horrible?

I'd have a huge joke attached to my last name.



TROUBLES IN NERD PARADISE

WE DISEMBARKED FROM the ferry, my legs an odd combination of relieved and rubbery as we stepped onto the cement “quay,” as Eamon called it. I would have said “dock” or “marina.”

The quay ran quite a way out into the water, and we had a nice view of the small harbor village. The tight streets were crowded with brilliantly colored cottages huddled before the edge of a green and gray rise of stony land that spread out epically in all directions.

Moors, I thought moodily, caving to my Jane Eyre daydreams. Maybe I was about to become entangled in some brooding love affair. Or maybe I was here to suffer, to build my character before going back to LA, where my curse of a father waited to put me back in my place. Maybe I’ve always been a melodramatic soul...

“Did she get you?” Eamon eyed my no doubt enchanted expression. His hair was being manhandled by the wind, and at some point he’d slipped on a cable-knit, wool sweater, turning himself into a stock photo of an Irish boy—with fake elf ears.

“Get me?” I asked.

“Ireland. She looks like she got you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said fast, hiding a smile beneath the sudden bite of cold that came with twilight. “It’s so quiet here.”

“It’s magic,” Ryder added. “Can’t you feel it?”

I smiled at Ryder. After all, this experience was his next five birthdays and Christmases.

At the end of the pier, Eamon loaded our luggage into a van parked on the street, groaning under the weight of my duffel. “There didn’t even used to be cars on the Aran Islands. Not sure what we’d have done if we’d had to lug all the filming stuff by horse and cart. We’ll walk from here. It’s not much to the restaurant.”

“Food,” Ryder moaned. My stomach agreed; it’d been a long time since we’d eaten.

I wouldn’t leave Annie behind to be stolen, so I hauled her past rows and rows of rentable bikes that weren’t even locked up. *What a strange place.* Eamon and Ryder walked together in front of me, both of them overloaded with spritely enthusiasm. Ryder looked close to skipping. Eamon, well, I wasn’t entirely sure about anything related to Eamon yet.

I lagged farther behind as Annie grew heavier.

Eamon stopped to stare back at me. “You want me to carry your girl there for a bit?”

“I got it.” I switched my guitar to my other hand. “Why do you keep staring like that?”

“Anyone ever told you how much you resemble your grandmother?”

“Yes.”

“It’s that dark hair and the bright, almost otherworldly, dark eyes. You know, I think your eyes match your hair color. How often does that happen?”

I squinted my quite worldly eyes at him. He took the hint and turned around. I tied back my hair. Grandma Mae’s author photos always showed her long hair down, so this was all I could do to set myself apart.

The sunset filled the sky with shadowy colors, and I finally felt more awake, most likely because it was now a valid time to be conscious back in LA. Still, I had to admit that Ireland had a strange charm. The night’s glow had more greens and blues than the dry, red-orange sunsets I was used to, and the lack of people made the whole island feel like it was stuck in slow motion.

“How many people live here?” I called out.

“About a thousand, I’d say, but they have to contend with swarms of tourists.” Eamon led us up the street to a restaurant that looked like an old, white barn surrounded by aged

picnic tables. *Tí Joe Watty's* was scrawled on the outside above a violin.

“It’s a fiddle,” Eamon said like he was arguing with my thoughts. “Come on, then. Everyone is excited to see you.”

Everyone?

He hauled open the outer door, and Ryder rushed for the inner one, and then we were staring at *everyone*. At least fifty cast and crew members, all holding up drinks. Petite Cate Collins stood on a chair at the center of the dim restaurant, raising a pint glass. “...not exactly a successful first day on location but—” Her words caught at the sight of us. “Witness our luck! M. E. Thorne’s grandchildren have arrived to bless our production.”

Oh, for crying out loud...

“Hey, guys!” Ryder yelled.

Everyone laughed, followed by a raucous call of “*Sláinte!*”

“It’s Irish for cheers,” Eamon said.

“I know,” I muttered, although I didn’t.

Cate rushed over. Her hair was tightly buzzed and beautifully gray. The laugh lines around her eyes were both sculpted and youthful. But all that aside, I bristled, recognizing the same intense excitement that had set off all my Thornian alarm bells back in LA months ago.

Dad, Ryder, and I had finally taken the bait and found our way to the Vantage Pictures lot and up to her office, where Cate had wept upon meeting us. “Elementia saved my

life,” she’d said while holding my hand like she wanted to steal it and keep it in an ornate box. She’d told us her vision for the adaptation that was days away from initial filming. Cate believed—fiercely—that the story should be celebrated as the feminist answer to Tolkien’s male-dominated world, and that her home country of Ireland would benefit from the same tourist adoration that New Zealand had garnered in light of *The Lord of the Rings* films.

I glanced around the rustic interior of Tí Joe Watty’s. Ireland might need to leave the nineteenth century if they wanted attention from the outside world, but then, the laughing, drinking production crew reminded me that a lot of people liked this sort of thing.

Cate was hugging Ryder too hard. I pried her off, trying to ignore the way Ryder hugged her tightly as well. “We’re hungry,” I said.

“Sure, sure!” She rushed us over to a table and soon meaty sandwiches and “chips” appeared.

“They’re french fries,” I said to myself, not exactly surprised, but tired.

“Oh, what a world that has different names for things,” Eamon shot back, sitting too close. His crystal eyes threatened to do that snarky wink again, and I tried to scoot away without luck. Five of us were stuffed around a circular table meant for two. Besides Eamon, Ryder, and Cate, we were introduced to a thin man with a floppy hat, who was

hunched over a notebook. “This is Henrik,” Cate said. “He’s the AD.”

Henrik peered at me through darkly tinted glasses. “I’m here to make sure this movie makes sense to people who haven’t memorized the books.”

I liked him immediately. “Not a fantasy fan?”

“I have other allegiances.” He pulled up his shirtsleeve, revealing J. R. R. Tolkien’s stylized initials tattooed on the brown skin of his left forearm. *Good Lord, what is it with nerds and their tattoos?* “I’m a supporter of the original trilogy.”

“Oh please, Henrik. M. E. Thorne was not a copycat.” Cate seemed to fall headlong into an ongoing argument. “Thorne’s story is about women saving the world. Tolkien went to the George Lucas school of ‘one woman per universe.’”

“Galadriel, Arwen, Éowyn,” Henrik listed.

“Oh? Three is it? Oh, that’s much better. Three women per universe should do the job.”

“Lúthien!” he snapped. “Or how about Haleth the Hunter? She killed thousands of orcs.”

“*The Silmarillion* characters don’t count,” Cate said. “That’s an entirely different book.”

Ryder was smiling hugely at their debate, and I couldn’t help weighing in too.

“I see Henrik’s point,” I said, enjoying Cate’s growl. “Elves. Magic trees. A world in peril. That all sounds Middle Earth to me.”

Henrik's satisfied grin was a bit trollish.

"This is anarchy," Cate said. "First, these fantasies, all of them, draw from *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer is the one who deserves the rights check from Tolkien, Lewis, Thorne, Rowling, et cetera. Secondly"—she turned at me—"how could you not see the genius of your grandmother's legacy?"

"I haven't read the books," I admitted proudly. "I'm—"

"She might be putting on a fair show, Cate," Eamon butted in, crossing his arms as he turned at me. "Ryder says your da read it to him when he was six. And you're saying that your da didn't read it to you as well? I don't believe it."

If I thought my face was red when we'd walked in, it was lava now. No, my dad had never read the books to me, and he'd only read them to my brother as part of Ryder's post-attempted-abduction therapy. My dad's voice filled my head, louder than usual: *Don't say a word, Iris. These people cannot be reasoned with.*

Cate and Eamon left me alone, discussing his elf ears before hauling over a girl who didn't seem much older than me. Her hair was shaved on one side and twisted into blond-and-pink spirals on the other. She wore fingerless gloves and laughed easily with her director boss. What I wouldn't give to be more like her. Artsy. Bold. Confident. People didn't mess with girls who looked like that. They messed with girls who looked like me—long hair without a committed style,

enough makeup to seem like no makeup, decent clothes that didn't flare into any particular style. In short, girls who were a dead ringer for their dead grandmother.

"And this is Iris," Eamon said. "M. E. Thorne's granddaughter. She's delighted to be here." In my defense, I was scowling long before that introduction.

The girl stuck out her hand. "Roxanne. Makeup artist." Great. She even had a cool name.

I managed a stiff smile and shook her hand across the tiny table.

"Roxy did my ears," Eamon said. "And she worked on that Shannara program you were talking about enjoying earlier." Roxanne beamed; apparently this was not a joke. Eamon's grin teased. "Lots of elves on that program, Iris?"

"We call them *TV shows*," I said. Oh my God, I was going to have to murder Eamon O'Brien, and I'd only just met him. Cate appraised me with a disappointed look, and I didn't like that either. "Yeah, I guess I only saw the commercials. Looked cool. I'll have to put it on my watch list," I added to Roxanne so that I didn't seem like a complete jerk.

Roxy gave me a half-smile. She knew I wasn't trying to insult her. She knew Eamon was messing with me. She knew that I had zero interest in being here. And she knew all that because girls don't get as cool as her without being perceptive about everything.

I made a study of my french fries...chips...whatever...

until everyone left me alone. The truth that had taken over my thoughts on the ferry—that this whole production was a lot bigger than I knew—made me scoot my chair closer to Henrik. He hooked an eyebrow at me. “Why was it a bad first day?” I asked. “What went wrong?” *Smooth, Iris.*

Henrik glared at his notebook and muttered, “Cate films in sequence. She believes it encourages the actors to feel the story, but it causes time constraints. And we only have two weeks to film a month’s worth. We spent all day waiting for the clouds to lift for one shot when we could have set up another day and had it in an hour.”

“We got the shot. Didn’t we, Henrik?” So Cate was listening. He nodded, and she aimed that Irish accent—mildly tuned down after a few decades in California—at me. “Your father sent me an email about you, Iris. He says you can be rather negative.” I bit my tongue, literally. If that wasn’t the pot calling the kettle... “But I bet with a little focus and exposure, we can turn you into a wild-hearted Thornian.”

Ryder laughed hard, coughing on a fry. I thumped his back, smacking hands with Eamon who was also trying to help. I pushed him away. This guy had gotten into my business fast. They all had. “So is this fantasy conversion camp or the set for a major motion picture?” I snarked.

Cate leaned forward. “Maybe it’s both.”

“Iris is a songwriter, Cate,” Eamon interrupted. “She brought her guitar and everything.”

Cate looked too interested, so I tried to head off whatever inquisition might come next.

“Where are the restrooms?”

“We call them *toilets*,” Eamon said, still with the baiting humor, still unaware of how unfunny this all was to me.

“How specific,” I shot back.

Eamon pointed, eyebrows raised.

I shimmied out from behind the table, while Ryder watched me with a tilted head that made him look like a terrier pup. No doubt trying to understand why his big sister made everything so awkward.