

## Yanya

"Why are you here?" The witch asked.

"To find my sister." Moria replied.

The witch tilted her head and squinted at Moria, apparently deciding for herself why she was there. Moria didn't flinch, despite feeling terrified, and studied the woman in turn. The witch was younger than Moria anticipated—beautiful in her own right with silver hair and soft wrinkles around piercing dark eyes. She was deceptively innocent-looking too, considering she was swallowed by legend and lore like most witches were.

Releasing a deep sigh and pouring herself a cup of tea, the witch said, "That is all? To find your sister? I can't help but think there's more to it."

"Are you going to help me find her or not?"

"I'm only trying to understand. You want to find her, but you're ashamed of her. Why do you want to find her if you want nothing to do with her?"

Moria shoved out of the chair and started for the door, not caring that she bumped into the table and knocked over the tea. The witch was no help, so why waste any more time here.

"You're not going to find her here in Port Tol, if that's what you're wondering. She's already been sold."

Moria stopped halfway across the threshold of the cottage. Her fingernails dug into her palms, and her jaw clenched, knowing she had to turn around.

Forcing herself to face the witch again, Moria waited.

The woman lounged in the chair, her hair cascading over her shoulders and her rosy cheeks matching her flowy dress. She propped her bare feet on the table and took a dramatic sip.

"You'll have to pay if you want to know more."

Moria's lips pinched in a fine line, but she didn't leave.

"We're in agreement then. She's on her way to the mines of Mount Nuropo."

Moria's breath caught, and she silently begged for it not to be true. First, she looked at the ceiling, then at the floor. Finally, she forced herself to look back at the witch and asked, "How do you know?"

"Can't be giving out trade secrets, can I? Now, a matter of the payment for the information."

Right, Moria came ready for this part. Reaching into her coat pocket, she pulled out a heavy purse of gold coins.

The witch frowned and let the front of her chair drop back to the floor. "Now there's a brilliant question. Where did a young girl like you get that much money? You didn't steal all that, did you?"

Could the witch see through her that easily? Moria took the risk and countered anyway, "And you don't actually steal babies, do you?"

The witch smirked. "Fair enough. But I'm not interested in gold."

"Then what do you want?"

The woman considered the question, drumming her fingers on the table. "For you to visit again."

*What, why?* Moria instantly didn't trust it.

Dropping the purse of gold on the table, Moria said, "Sorry, I'm a bit too busy to visit. I'll be sailing to Mount Nuropo."

"Oh, that won't be a problem." The woman flicked a small stone at Moria. "Very few can use that, but you can. Focus on me when you hold it. It'll bring you back."

Moria reflexively caught the stone out of the air, then looked down at the opal in her palm. At first glance, it looked like an ordinary rock that might have monetary value for its swirling colors. But upon closer inspection, the colors seemed to move and flow in the stone, and it caused a light tingling on her palm.

Moria looked up, wide-eyed. "How did you know?"

"The same way I know where your sister is being taken. Don't worry about trying to return by a certain time. When you're ready to come back, I'll be waiting."

Moria slipped the stone into her coat pocket and forced a thin smile. "Of course, I'll return." Then she left, wondering what would happen if she never did.

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Moria was desperate. She squeezed her eyes shut against the coughing that wracked her body and the heavy jingle of shackles and suffering bodies. She couldn't stop shaking with fever and the damp conditions of the ship's underbelly, and her stomach puckered with starvation.

It'd all gone south weeks ago when the crew realized she wasn't he, and she was *different*. The crew missed the stone, though, when they shook her down and took everything she'd ever owned. They took the hat that hid her untamable hair, the oversized coat that hid her petite frame, and the boots that made heavy thuds when she walked to make her sound like she carried more

weight. They emptied her pockets, threw her stinky socks overboard, and took the bag with her mother's ring—but they never bothered to check her clenched fist.

Moria couldn't use it, though to escape. The opal was a trap. Everyone knew not to trust a witch. Even Moria's sister had avoided the prospect of going to the Daughter of the Devil for help. The warm and eclectic demeanor was a ruse to draw unsuspecting victims into her talons. The witch must have known Moria would sneak on the slave ship and be forced to suffer and die here. But if Moria used the stone to escape, her only other option was to become enslaved to the witch.

The hatch to the hull slammed open, and Moria flinched against the sound. Multiple sets of heavy footsteps journeyed into the depths, and meaty hands jerked Moria and the other slaves to their feet.

"Everyone up!" The captain ordered, and the chains bolted to the floor were unlocked as the chains between shackles were clamped.

Weak and bleary-eyed, Moria and the others were dragged onto the deck, down a narrow gangplank, and forced to stand in a long line on the docks.

An older woman with the countenance of a warlord and an uncomfortably tight bun walked down the line of new prospects. She studied each body in turn, assessing their strength and ability to survive more than a few months. When the woman reached Moria, she scowled and pinched Moria's atrophied arms. At the same time, Moria couldn't swallow the racking cough anymore.

"Without a second glance." The woman said, "She'll be useless. Dispose of this one."

"Aye, Madam Willem." The captain said, and he pulled out a ring of keys to unlock Moria from the rest.

Moria's heart somersaulted in her chest. She'd been desperate, but now she was about to die. Too weak to resist as the captain dragged her to the edge of the dock, Moria felt the tingle of ether in the opal clenched in her fist. There was nothing left for her to do, and as Moria was tossed into the freezing ocean, she focused on the witch.

A low hum filled Moria's ears as the tingling in her hand spread throughout her body, then there was silence. Forcing one eye open and then the other, she saw the witch crouched in front of where she sat, huddled in a dark corner of the cottage.

"Oh, you're worse off than I thought." The witch said, her dark eyes taking in Moria's tattered, stinking clothes and matted hair. The woman held out a hand. "Come on, let's get you a warm bath. Can you stand?"

Moria sat stunned, and the witch had to coax her out of her shock and onto her feet. "It's okay, you're safe now... I know, I know, you didn't want to give up on her. You're not failing, I promise. Oh, that cough doesn't sound good, does it? We'll have to do something about that."

It felt like Moria was moving through a dream as the witch warmed a bath and helped wash her battered body, then eased her into clean linen. The stiff bed was the softest thing Moria had ever laid on, and when the witch returned with a bowl of warm broth, Moria couldn't contain it any longer.

Tears leaked out of the sides of her eyes, and when the witch sat on the edge of the bed to pull Moria into her arms, the tears turned to sobs. Without thinking, Moria summoned the handkerchief on the far dresser to dry her face, then realized what she was doing and froze, letting it drop. The witch didn't react with yelling or violence, though, seeing Moria use ether. Instead, she summoned the handkerchief the rest of the way, causing the silk fabric to drift into her hand.

"It's okay," the witch said, tucking the handkerchief into Moria's hand. "You don't have to hide it here."

"But why are you doing this?" Moria asked before blowing her nose. "This isn't how being indebted to a witch works."

"Well now, that's a complicated question. Would you be offended if I said because I don't think you have anyone else to go to?"

Maybe Moria should have been offended, but she wasn't. And for the first time in a long time, she slept through the night, passing out in the woman's arms. When she woke, the witch was still there, knitting in a rocking chair beside the bed and her barefoot tapping absently on the floor. Moria watched the woman for a long time, desperately trying to use her as a distraction to forget the sense of failure that sat like a pit in her stomach.

This was the most dangerous person in all of Port Tol and Moria was probably in as much danger here as she was chained to the bottom of a slave ship sailing to Mount Nuropo. But the more she studied the witch, the more she reminded Moria of an auntie back home. Auntie Tulla didn't walk around barefoot and knit strange hats. But she did have wild hair and a propensity to throw things at eligible bachelors who asked her out. Funny enough, her auntie was also one of the few people Moria still thought of fondly these days.

"Your sister isn't at the mines anymore." The witch said without looking up from her knitting. "Would you like to know where she is?"

Auntie-like or not, Moria knew better than to trust the woman. "You lied to me. She was never at the mines, was she?"

The witch muttered under her breath as she counted stitches, then set the knitting down to focus on Moria. "There is one thing you should know about me, Mory, and that is that I never lie.

Ever. She was at the mines until about two weeks ago when she caused a cave-in that trapped half the overseers and made most of the mines inoperable."

Moria blinked. *The twitty-dit. Mum always did say she had it in her to destroy*, Moria thought. "Did she use her...?"

"Yes, she used her ether to do it. It was quite brave really. Would you like to know what happened to her?"

"I... how do I know I can trust you?"

The wrinkles around the witch's eyes deepened as she studied Moria. "Oh, child, you're not used to trusting, are you?"

"I'm not used to trusting strange witches who tell me things that cause me to become captured on a slave ship."

The witch considered the point as she tapped her toes on the floor and scrunched her face at the ceiling. After a moment, she said, "You know, my mother was the first one to ever call me witch, and the moment she did, I knew I had to run for my life. It took a long time for me to trust myself not to wake up one day and have the sudden urge to steal babies. It took even longer for me to finish grieving the loss of my name and my new identity. But even now, I still have a hard time trusting sometimes. Especially myself. Rest and take your time. Your sister is safe for now. You can ask me where she is when you're ready."

It took a whole week to decide to trust the witch. Then, it took another three days to decide she really did want to know. The time allowed Moria's body the chance to recover enough to crawl out of bed. And she even became brave enough to use her ether when she thought her host wasn't looking.

When she finally worked up the courage to confront the witch—still sallow and coughing—Moria found the woman baking in her kitchen and openly using ether for a second pair of hands.

"I want to know where my sister is." Moria said, clenching her fists against her own nervousness.

The witch stopped kneading dough and used her wrist to wipe her brow. She got flour on her face anyway, and a kitchen rag darted through the air to wipe her face properly. "Are you sure you're ready? You look like you could use a few more days of rest."

"I've already waited long enough."

"Alright then."

The witch led Moria over to the little dining room table in the corner and kicked her feet up. "Your sister, along with many other ether users who escaped the mines, are hiding on the far side of Mount Nuropo in a town called Blyth. It was a hard journey, and a few of the weaker ether users didn't make it. But your sister worked hard to lead them to safety and find sanctuary."

Moria looked down at her hands clenched in her lap. "Oh, I see. That's good to hear. She must not need me to come rescue her then."

"Oh, but she still needs your help desperately." The witch's motherly countenance turned tense. "Those who own the mines are *not* happy. They have dozens of search parties looking for your sister and the other ether users, and they're coming closer to finding them every day. Your sister is strong, but I doubt even she will be able to hold them off without your help."

Moria looked up from where she stared at her lap, a new sense of urgency reawakened. "But what can I do?"

"That I can't tell you. All I can say is there are other ways to reach Mount Nuropo besides a slave ship, and they are much faster."



"Other ether users?"

"I'm not the only witch, and there are more mages in this world than you might think."

Moria sighed. There were ways to find those other mages, but they were dangerous. It also meant accepting their power for what it is. But her sister had gotten herself in trouble again, and they'd made a promise to each other that Moria couldn't break.

The witch dropped her feet to the floor and stretched. "Right, you've decided then. Now, regarding your payment for the information."

Moria shook her head. "I don't have any more gold pieces."

"Ah, but we've been over this already. I don't want gold. I want you to come visit me again."

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This time, Moria didn't hesitate. She ducked behind the closest building from where she'd been spying and clutched the opal to her chest. Focusing on the witch, Moria felt the buzzing in the stone spread through her entire body. Then, she stood in the corner of the cozy cottage, still dripping wet from rain.

Throwing back her hood, Moria looked around until she heard a humming coming from one of the back bedrooms. She ran to the sound, and as soon as she found the witch washing clothes in a basin, Moria gasped, "You must help us."

The witch looked up from her work, her cheeks as rosy as ever. "Hold on, you're dripping water all over my clean floors. Let's take this to the kitchen."

"We need to stop them," Moria continued, her words rushing as the witch herded her back down the hall. "They're going to use their own ether users to try and kill my sister and the others

who escaped the mines. There are too many, and their ether users are too strong. They know where my sister is, and they're preparing to make their move any day now."

"Alright, let's take a breath." The witch said as she pulled off Moria's cloak and tossed it in the corner. "Wait, give me your shoes, they're tracking mud everywhere."

"But we don't have time to wait. We need to do something *now*."

"I hear you, but I'm watching your sister. Madam Willem and the other mine owners leveraged the local lords to lend soldiers. But your sister hasn't been idle either. She's been recruiting in Blyth, and their villagers and locals have more ether users than we do. They are much more tolerant and willing to help."

"But it won't be enough. What are a handful of villagers against a battalion of soldiers? They'll be slaughtered."

"Mory, Mory, listen to me." The witch said, grabbing both of Moria's arms and forcing her to focus. "Is your sister rebellious, or is she brave?"

"I—what?" Moria stammered. She was still breathing hard, but her body stopped fidgeting in the witch's arms. "What do you mean?"

"Think on it while I make some tea and find you dry clothes."

The sun had set, and Moria sat curled on a couch beside a crackling fire before she mustered the courage to reply. "What's the point of being brave if it *only* turns everyone against you?"

The soothing clicking of knitting needles stilled, and the witch stopped rocking. She set down her knitting to give Moria her full attention. "Do you not consider yourself brave?"

"No, of course not. And if my sister hadn't been 'brave', maybe we would still be with our family. Maybe they wouldn't have called us Daughters of the Devil."

"Why did your sister's bravery separate you from your family? Was it because she did something worth disowning or was it because your family couldn't accept you two for who you really are?"

Moria couldn't bring herself to believe the answer the witch hinted towards. Yet the words felt like a punch to the gut. She sank further into the couch, feeling like she was being drawn and quartered by her own feelings and wishing she could disappear to escape them. Then she did, her clothes and hands vanishing and the teacup she held becoming suspended by invisible hands. Moria panicked, looking frantically around, instinctively scouting her escape from the witch's anger for using ether.

"Oh, hey now." The witch cooed, setting aside her knitting and creeping over to the couch to kneel beside Moria. You're okay. You've never done that before, have you? Oh, don't worry. You'll learn to control it. Just give it practice and time."

Desperate to escape the witch seeing her this way, Moria jumped as her hands became visible again. She looked up to find the woman watching her with a terribly sad and distant expression. Moria said, "I'm sorry, I really didn't mean to do that."

"It's okay," the witch patted Moria's hand. "Ether is welcome here."

"But I—"

"But you didn't hurt me or anyone else. You know, you really are a gifted user. Have you ever considered using your ether to help your sister fight? I think she needs your bravery and ether more than you realize. I'll tell you what. Sleep on it tonight, and if you decide to join her, let me know in the morning. I've done my own homework, and I can get you to her by lunch tomorrow."

"What will it cost me for your help?"

The witch smiled. "I think you know already."

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Moria grabbed her sister's arms, terrified.

"I'll be back." She said, still in shock at seeing the grotesque amount of blood that covered Lillian. "I promise I'll be back. I won't let you die."

Lillian couldn't speak as she lay on the ground, clutching her stomach. She blinked in a daze and gave a shaky nod. Risking a glance back at the battlefield, Moria spotted Madam Willem watching with callous fury as her little army fought the freed ether users. The moment Lillian went down, the tides of war turned, and Moria knew what she had to do if any of them wanted to survive.

Clutching the opal to her chest, Moria focused on the witch, and an instant later, she was back in the cottage. She stumbled, adjusting to the sudden change in scenery and silence, then ran to where the witch was already waiting.

"You have to come." Moria gasped as she stumbled to a stop in front of the woman. Then she glanced up and down, taking in the chainmail armor and the white hair pulled back in a tight braid. "You... knew?"

"You're surprised? Child, I've been waiting all morning."

"But you've never come to help before."

"Because you weren't ready for me to join until now. Come on. Let's show the world we won't be bullied anymore."

This time, the witch pulled out her own swirling stone and took Moria's hand. An instant later, they were back on Mount Nuropo in the middle of the fight. First, the witch looked down at Lillian, taking her last breaths, then she scanned the clearing until she spotted Madam Willem standing on the far edge of the tree line.

"There you are." The witch growled, and the motherly countenance was gone in an instant. The witch hiding under the sweet exterior appeared, and like a werewolf transforming under a full moon, she embodied all the horrors of the legends and lore surrounding her. The witch's eyes still locked on Madam Willem, and she commanded, "Moria, heal your sister."

"I don't know how—"

Snapping her head down, the witch looked at Moria, the whites of her eyes turning black to match her dark irises, and ordered, "Heal your sister!" Then she lunged into the air.

Moria watched as the witch half-jumped and half-flew across the clearing. She landed in the middle of the grassy meadow, and the ground shook under the impact.

"Mother!" The witch yelled, her voice booming as she stood like a dark angel rising from the ground. "I've come to claim what is my right."

Madam Willem stepped out from the shadows, and the woman scowled at the monster that called upon her. "And what 'right' is that, *witch*? You forfeit any rights the day you were born."

"The right to my name!" The witch screamed as a battle cry.

The fighting stilled, and ether users and mercenaries alike stopped to look at her. Moria watched, too, but while everyone else slunk away from the witch's power, Moria stood enraptured. Maybe she should be afraid of the woman. This was the real monster. The one the

witch kept hidden behind bare feet, rosy cheeks, and unconditional love. But Moria didn't see a monster. She saw bravery.

Then Lillian took a gasping, sucking breath, and Moria remembered she needed to save her dying sister.

Laying her hands on Lillian's stomach, Moria let the ether flow through her body as she impressed her will on it. Watching the witch, Moria *finally* understood. The ether was not something to be feared. It was a tool, and it was beautiful.

Lillian gasped, life and strength returning to her body. At the same time, the witch jumped over the rest of the battlefield in the background and landed out of view.

"Come on." Lillian said, poking at her healed body, then scrambling to her feet. "This isn't over yet."

Only hours earlier, Moria had hesitated. She'd joined Lillian's fight but wasn't sure she could or should. Now, Moria took her sister's outstretched hand and relished the feeling of ether flowing between them.

Lillian led the fight, but she had always been the leader. Moria stuck by Lillian's side, though, watching her back and throwing aid to the other ether users around them.

The witch was right. Moria was powerful—more powerful than most of the mages who battled and almost more powerful than Lillian. Yet, each time the ground shook with the witch's power as she battled—or the witch released a shockwave of energy against the mage who protected Madam Willem—another layer of Moria was freed, and strength was added to the ether she carried.

Before long, Moria was fighting along side her sister, not behind her, and she released her own waves of destruction, crippling the enemy. There was a place in the world for someone like

Moria—she'd have to make the space, like all the other ether users here—but the witch was not afraid to own her innate being. It was the same as how Lillian loved the ether she carried. Not in a greedy way, where she loved the potential for power, but she loved it the same way she loved looking exactly like her twin sister.

Moria spun to face another soldier, preparing to careen another rock suspended in the air—but there was no one else to fight. Somehow, the battle was already over.

The witch yelled from the sky, and Moria looked up to see the woman tumbling through the air, grappling the mage she fought and slamming them both to the ground. A cloud of dust mushroomed up, and after a long moment, the witch walked out of the dust, sinister and victorious.

"Mother!" The witch yelled, walking with a steady gait towards where Madam Willem hid behind a tree. Rocks and gravel began to rise off the ground around the witch as she approached. "Am I monster enough for you now?"

The elderly woman tried to make a break for the woods, but trees cracked and crashed all around her, blocking her exit. Trapped, Madam Willem spun to face her daughter.

"And what do you want from me." Madam Willem sneered. "To have my head on a spike?"

"I have a name." The witch declared. "Say my name."

"Monsters don't have names."

A half dozen rocks shot through the air and smacked into the trees in a perfect outline behind Madam Willem. "I said, say my *name*."

"Yanya." Moria called out.

She didn't know how she knew, but she *knew* that was the witch's name.

Yanya was creeping closer to her mother with murder in her eyes, but hearing the name, she stopped as if jolted out of a dream.

"Your name is Yanya." Moria said again, taking a step forward. "I know your name."

Lillian stepped up beside Moria, every bit the leader, and added, "Your name is Yanya, and it is not the name your mother gave you, but it is the name you were born with because it is the name you deserve."

"We know your name." Moria continued, glancing around at the other ether users creating a semi-circle to watch. "The family I was born to abandoned me, but they are not my family. You are."

Yanya was breathing hard as she stared at her mother, but her shoulders sagged, and the rocks and projectile weapons fell out of the air.

Taking Moria's hand, Lillian added, "Did our ether not give us the power to show mercy? We are not monsters, and neither are you."

Yanya turned, taking in the battlefield. The enemy was down, and they were injured, but for the most part, they were not dead. Only the mage Yanya battled, and a few other ether users lay unmoving. Yanya stared for a long time at the mercy that lay groaning on the ground before she turned back to her mother.

"Leave." Yanya growled. "Take your wounded and tell the rest of the world what happened here. Let them decide for themselves who are the real monsters."

Without hesitation, Madam Willem ran, leaving her soldiers behind.

At first, Yanya helped Moria and Lillian heal the wounded and bury the few dead. But as the rest of the ether users returned to their new homes, Yanya settled under a tree to stare into the



distance with an unsettling quiet. Moria recognized the reserved introspection she'd already felt in herself a thousand times. Nudging Lillian, she pulled out the opal. Before, she didn't understand, but now Moria *knew* how to travel with two people, and she transported them back to Yanya's cottage. They worked in comfortable silence, not needing to speak as they warmed leftover stew and boiled water for tea and prepared a warm bath.

When ready, they returned to Mount Nuropo and approached Yanya gingerly. Kneeling beside the woman who'd become more of a mother than her mother had ever been, Moria held out a steaming cup of tea and said, "You know giving you a name wasn't free. We need to discuss a matter of payment."

Yanya broke out of her daze and looked between the twins and the mug. Her eyes started to glisten, and she grabbed the drink to cradle against her chest. "Oh? And what kind of payment were you thinking?"

"Lillian and I visit you. We have no specific time to drop by, but whenever you're ready for company, we'll come."

"You see," Lillian added, "I would really appreciate an auntie—"

Lillian didn't get to finish. Tossing her tea aside, Yanya grappled both girls in an enveloping hug.

"Well," Yanya said, releasing the girls and wiping a few stray tears from her eyes. "I have some leftover stew we can heat up back home if you're free now."