

## At Home

I'm sitting on Gaia's red sofa looking out the window at all the trees and robins flying by. The wind blows gently and then harshly into the leaves, so much so that some of them fall onto the ground. This has been my life. Living in this cabin with my teacher, and nothing but her or the dirt below the foundation of the cabin to support me. High heels click into the living room and my tight curls bounce as I turn my head.

"Celeste, I'm going to the library to get some spell books for our next lesson." The tulle on Gaia's black dress flows in the wind, much like the leaves outside drifting in the breeze. Her red, shiny lips stretch out to the sides of her face to give me a closed-mouth smile that says 'I care about you' and 'Don't get into any trouble while I'm gone'. I already know what she is about to say.

"Don't have too much fun while I'm gone!". She always says that, as if I've ever done anything that would suggest I'd burn the house down while she's away. I let out a weak, exasperated laugh as she opens the front door. She waves goodbye to me, and I wave back before the door fits itself back into the doorframe. I can only imagine the sound of Gaia's high heels tapping against the ground as she walks to the library, the bold sound traveling out into the rest of the world instead of being confined to the cabin.

I lift my body off the couch and begin walking around the cabin as I imagine my footsteps sounding through the rest of the world that feels so far away. One foot in front of the other, leading me to the library Gaia is going to. But she wouldn't let me go there. She'd say it's 'too dangerous' and 'there isn't anything out there that you wouldn't be able to see right here'. I accepted that the first time she said it, but I've been wondering is that really true? Am I truly not missing out on anything?

I walk into Gaia's office. Her black, wooden table is sat in front of a window she never opens, yet the red drapes partially covering the glass somehow manage to flow through a draft. On her desk, there is a clock that I hear counting down the time until the day is over. I haven't been in Gaia's office much, I'm here only when she wants me to be. The room has always seemed like a mystery to me, like the way the papers and notebooks on her desk are always in the same position. The way her pen is always slanted at the same angle. The way her black and red velvet chair is always slightly pulled out from her desk when she is not sitting there working on our next magic lesson.

I walk around, perusing the bookshelves that stand tall against the wooden walls and run my fingers against their spines as I continue to move forward. Suddenly, the white lace of my dress gets stuck on the wall. My eyebrows furrow as I look down. I kneel down and my eyes focus to catch a sharper image of what I see. There is a golden knob on the right side of a small, square door placed into the bottom of the wall. What would fit in there? More books? More wands? More glass bottles to make potions in? There's only one way to find out.

I grasp the knob with my fingers and pull the door open. Inside are two shelves: one with papers and one with a photo album. I look out the window of the office to see if Gaia's returned yet, and then gulp and slowly slide the papers off the shelf. The first paper is titled *Fairy Magic: Stella Natas*. I've never heard of this name before in our lessons. Are these spells she learned when she was still in magic school? Not wanting to mess the order of the papers up, I try to put them back in the same place I found them. I walk over to the window again and slowly peer out to see if Gaia has returned with several books stacked in her arms. I don't see her yet.

I quickly walk back over to the door I never knew about before now and sit on the red carpeting lining Gaia's office. My back slouches down as my hand reaches for a black leather

photo album. I open to a random page. The pages are empty. I flip to the next page. And then the first page. Nothing. Finally, I flip a few pages from the back and find a photo of a little girl and a woman. The woman has glowing, golden skin and black hair with tight curls springing out of her head. She's smiling, the skin around her eyes wrinkling up and exuding joy. She loves sitting in the same room as her child. Her daughter has a similar complexion and similar hair. Her head is slightly turned towards her mother, and her hand is holding onto her mom's long, white sleeve. The emotion exuding from this photo is contagious, so much so that my mouth has unconsciously turned into a large, goofy grin.

I look closer at the daughter. Close to her temple, there is a bow in her hair. There's something else to the side of the bow, so I inspect further. There is a birthmark in the shape of a star slightly sitting on her right cheekbone. I lower the photo album down onto the ground and slide it back into the door. I grasp the golden knob one last time before I stand up and speed walk into the living room, hand covering a spot just below my temple. I turn to a mirror that hangs on the wall close to the front door and lower my hand from my face. I see it and tremble.

Tears pool in my eyes before they fall onto my birthmark that is in the shape of a star.

I continue pacing back and forth in the living room with what feels like millions of questions floating around in my head: *Is that actually my mother? If she is my mother, would I still be able to find her? Is she still alive? How do I find her? How do I not remember her? What did Gaia do to me? Who really is Gaia? Why me? Why is this my life?*

My heart pounds on my chest as if it's trying to get out. My body feels as though it's simmering, like a pot on the stove that is about to overflow onto the ground. I look in the mirror once again, my face now flush, and the birthmark still there on my face. I turn to look out the

window again, but all I see is the same as before— trees, leaves falling from trees, and birds flying back up to their nests.

*I need to get out of here, I think to myself. I have the urge to scream, yet hold it back. I need to escape. I need to find my mother, if she's still out there. I need to take my life back.*

I walk up to the front door and twist the knob, but it refuses to open. I twist the doorknob to the left and then to the right, my hand wanting to slip off due to my sweaty palms. With each pull I tug harder and harder, yet nothing happens. I feel up on the doorframe, but there's no key there. I look under the welcome mat, and still nothing. I think back to the hidden door in Gaia's office, and run back over with the utmost haste. I find the picture of my mother and I once again, my heart splitting into two upon second glance. I reach into the plastic slip that encases the photo, and below it find a red key. I quickly slip the photo and the album back into their places and close the door, keeping these items hidden like Gaia intended.

I run back to the door, looking out the window once more, Gaia nowhere in sight. I stick the key into the lock and twist, the key glowing in my hand as the door unlocks itself and opens. I cup my hand over my mouth. My feet touch the dirt and grass for the first time, at least from what I remember, as I close the door behind me.

*I'm free. I'm finally free.*

I pull my hand away from my face to see the red, glowing key in my palm. *If I have this, will Gaia be able to track me? I don't want her finding me, I can't have this on me.*

I chuck the key into the woods, scattered among the leaves, and run off in the opposite direction Gaia went for what feels like miles. Leaves stick to the soles of my feet, and the wind flows through my golden brown hair. I caress the bark of trees with the backs of my hands, with no Gaia around to stop me. In the middle of this moment, a *woosh* through the air makes my

heart skip a beat. However, when I look up, it is just someone flying through the air. I wonder where they're going? What is it like having no one to stop you from going anywhere? What is it like to have no one and nothing to be afraid of?

I continue walking, and occasionally look behind me to ensure Gaia hasn't somehow managed to find me, and my feet stumble upon a pathway of rocks that lead out from the woods. I look up at the sky where even the clouds follow the rocky path that lays before me. I step on each rock until I see people walking on brick streets. They're talking, laughing, dancing, and celebrating. I walk up to a building with an orange brick exterior. The windows alongside the door show people sitting at tables together. Multiple groups of people. I walk in and see others performing magic—making objects shrink, sparkles appearing in the air, and lighting wood on fire with their bare hands. And Gaia says there's nothing for me to see out in the real world? What a liar.

I step foot through the door and make sure someone won't unexpectedly cast a spell on me that will make me start levitating or dramatically alter my appearance. Who knows what these people know that I don't. Who knows what Gaia wanted me to learn and kept me from learning. People have books and wands in their hands, while others just use their fingers and minds. Two people burst out in laughter behind me so loudly that my head seems to jerk itself around to look. There is someone who has short, blond hair that washes out their already pale skin, and striking red eyes. Their smile reveals their pointed teeth. I've seen creatures who look like that before in one of Gaia's textbooks. I scratch my chin before I remember what they are. It hits me. *They must be a vampire.*

There's someone clutching onto the vampire's shoulders in an all-white, flowy outfit. His dark complexion glistens under the light and his smile radiates throughout the room. A single

earring in the shape of a cross dangles from one of his ears, and, when he finishes laughing, his eyelids reveal almost fluorescent blue eyes. From Gaia's teachings, I know those eyes can only mean one thing. *That's a ghost.*

The person with blue eyes catches me staring and waltzes over to me.

"Is everything okay? Are you lost?" he says while his blue eyes pierce through my soul. The vampire quickly follows suit.

"All good?"

I stand there frozen for a few seconds, my body not knowing what to do in front of new people after being trapped for what feels like all my life. Words somehow manage to escape from my mouth. "Uh, well, things could be better. That's for sure."

I tuck my hair behind my ear as the boy dressed in all white begins speaking again. "Sorry to hear that, I know the feeling," he says in a caring tone that Gaia could only seem to imitate. "I'm Idris, by the way, and this is my friend Frankie." He gestures to the person with red eyes. They wave their hand and Idris slowly leads us to a nearby bench in the building.

We sit together. Idris's lips part once more, "So, you're having a bad day. Do you want to talk about it?"

Frankie's red eyes glance over to him and back at me, staring deeply into my inner conscious. "Yeah, anything we can help with?"

I take a deep breath. "Where do I begin..."

I tell them about Gaia. I tell them about the house we've been living in and how it seems as though I've been living there my entire life, but something has always felt missing. The amount of years I've been alive have never made sense with the lack of memories I have. I tell them about the hidden door in Gaia's office and what layed beyond it. Then about the photo, my

mother, the birthmark on the child's face, and the birthmark on mine, along with how I managed to escape and ended up here. I tell them how I desperately want to find my mother, if that's a possible feat.

"And now I'm here," I say as I gesture my hands out to my sides. Frankie and Idris's eyes widen.

Frankie lets out a scoff. "Wow, I don't even know Gaia and I already *despise* her."

Idris nods in agreement and a deep exhale exits his nose. "So, have you thought about how you're going to find your mother?"

I let out a quick sigh. "I don't know how to go about it. I'm scared Gaia is somehow going to be tracking my every move. I'm scared of what she'll do after she sees I'm no longer home." I slump back further against the bench.

Frankie places their hand on my shoulder. "We can protect you," they say with warmth in their voice that makes me feel like my body is being wrapped in a tight, comforting hug.

Idris puts his hand on my other shoulder. "And we can help you find your mother, if you want."

My head hangs low as tears form in my eyes. I nod approvingly, thanking the universe I found people who actually support me. Even though I met them a little bit ago, I feel like I've known them forever.

We continue sitting on the bench and begin to talk about our plan for finding my mother. When I woke up this morning, this is not at all how I thought I'd be spending my day. I wonder how much of my 16 years of life have been lies. While the anger and confusion eats away at me, I can't let it be a distraction. I must let it fuel me. I must use it to help me find my mother.

“Can you describe what your mother looks like?” Frankie asks as they pull out a pen and pad of paper.

I tell them about her golden skin, tight curls that fill out her afro, and her heart-shaped face full of kindness and love. I shake my head. “Sorry, I don’t know how much of a help that is for you.”

Frankie’s lips pucker and move from side to side as they continue to drag a pen across their pad of paper. A few seconds later, they show me the drawing.

“Is this her?”

My eyebrows raise and my mouth is left somewhat agape. “Y- yeah, that’s what she looks like in the picture. How did you know?”

Idris turns to me. “If Frankie focuses hard enough on one thought someone is having, they’re able to read their mind and see what the other person sees.”

Frankie shrugs their shoulders. “You know, just a special vampire thing or whatever.”

The three of us chuckle. I release a sharp exhale and look over at the two of them. “So, what do we do next?”

Idris turns his head to Frankie. “Give me the drawing.” Idris places the pad of paper in his lap and places his hands over the picture, then closes his eyes. Afterwards, Idris slowly opens his eyes. “Okay, now both of you touch the picture.”

Frankie and I sit there for a few seconds touching the paper before we start to notice a faint pathway made of sparkles that lay before us.

“This pathway will lead us to your mother. And don’t worry about Gaia, no one besides the three of us can see the path since we’re the only ones who have touched the drawing,” Idris says in a calming voice.



I choke back tears. I'm so glad my mother is still alive. I cannot wait to meet her. Will she remember me? I sniffle as Frankie and Idris stand up and make their way to the door.

Frankie turns to me and says, "Celeste, are you ready?"

I stand up. "Absolutely." I've never been more ready, yet terrified, to do anything in my life.

The three of us fly over the town for a bit, all while keeping our eyes glued to the sparkling pathway before us. Then, we pass over the woods. I'm still in awe of the great things that surround me. All of the people, places, architecture, and magical abilities I've seen so far. My curiosity grows exponentially by the moment.

The sparkling path eventually leads us to a tucked away village full of cabins, some of which look much like Gaia's. Many of them have the same exterior where there's one log stacked on top of one another. I see in the distance that the pathway stops at one of the cabins. As Frankie, Idris, and I fly up in the sky, all I can see is a brown roof and a little patio sitting at the front of my mother's cabin. The two of them look out to the distance, and then at me. I look back at them and smile.

We reach the pathway's end and land in front of the house. I'm here. I'm *home*. The three of us walk up the steps of the patio and find ourselves standing in front of the door.

Idris gestures towards the door before he says, "Go ahead. Do the honors."

My fist meets the wood of the door and I knock a couple times. I then wait a few seconds. There's no response. I decide to knock again, this time paying attention to whether or not the curtains in the windows move. Yet, still nothing. My heart shatters into even more pieces in my chest as we stand there for a few minutes.

*Where is she? Is she safe? Is she okay?*

My chest tightens and I grasp my white, lacy top. As I lean over, Frankie lightly rubs my back. I wish I could say I feel comforted by this, but it does not make me feel any different. I finally muster the strength to speak up. “Where is she? Did we do the spell wrong?”

Idris shakes his head. “No, I couldn’t have done it wrong.”

“Maybe your mother went somewhere after Idris casted the spell?” Frankie suggests. Willing to try anything, I sigh and turn to Idris.

“Can you *please* cast the spell again?”

Idris looks around the neighborhood before he decides to sit down on the front steps to perform the same set of steps that he did in the magic café. After he’s done, Frankie and I follow the same instructions Idris gave us before. Thankfully, another pathway lights up in front of us. I walk forward and prepare to fly up into the air once more.

“Let’s go.”

This pathway seems to go on further than the last one. We pass by a few more villages, some woods, and even more villages. I take deep breaths and Frankie takes notice.

“Don’t worry, everything will be okay.” I know they’re probably right, but something deep inside of me says otherwise. What if Gaia got to my mother before I did? What if I have to go back with Gaia? Why did I ever leave the cabin? Gaia’s going to be so mad at me if she sees me again.

“Why am I doing this?” Idris looks over at me after I speak with his head cocked to the side.

“You obviously have your reasons. Don’t worry, we’ll be with you every step of the way.” He proceeds to give me a consoling smile, and although it makes me feel supported, it by no means makes me feel one hundred percent safe.

Finally, the sparkling pathway comes to a halt in the middle of the woods. However, before we proceed, Frankie sticks out their arms to stop us from flying further and escorts us to the top of a pine tree. With each of us perched onto a branch, Frankie leans in and whispers to us. “I hear yelling and the zaps of wands. We need a game plan.”

Idris, thinking quickly, says, “Hold my hands, both of you. When you do, close your eyes.”

We stay perched up on the branches for a few seconds longer before Idris releases us from his grasp. “Don’t worry, no one will be able to see us now.”

I take a look down at my feet, and I can see the branch I’m standing on through them. “Wow,” I say as I look back up.

“Okay,” Idris says. “Let’s stick together and stay as quiet as possible. Let’s go.”

Idris, Frankie, and I fly with our arms linked together. As we approach, the shrill voice I hear sends chills up my spine. An image of Gaia pops in my mind, with her fake nice smile and cold eyes. And her piercing voice.

“Hey,” I whisper. “That’s her. That’s Gaia.”

Her wand shoots red fire at someone, who is levitating up in the air dodging her hits. That’s her. That is my mother.

My mother then bends her arms and crosses them in front of her chest in an X-formation before straightening them out in front of her. Sparkles shoot out of her palms and Gaia starts floating up off the ground. The higher she floats, the more she gasps for air. We fly over to Gaia,

and Frankie points in her direction. Before we know it, Gaia drops to the ground and is fast asleep.

The three of us land back on the ground, and Idris's hug removes the invisibility spell from us. My mother gasps in our direction. "Celeste?" she says, her voice trembling. "It's been *years*. I've been looking everywhere for you. I can't believe you're here, love."

The leaves crunch under her feet as she makes her way to me. Her arms wrap tightly around me, making me feel secure and loved. Genuinely loved.

"I can't believe you're here either," I say as a croak escapes my throat before my mother speaks again.

"So this is the woman who took you? Gaia?"

I shudder. "Yes, do you know her?"

She releases me from her arms. "You could say that. I can explain. Honey, let's go sit down."

We plop down on the ground under an oak tree sitting criss-cross before she takes a deep breath to tell her story.

"When Gaia and I were younger, we went to magic school together. While we were there, we'd have to cast spells in front of the class. Gaia couldn't perform spells. I was at the top of our class, and although I never talked about it to anyone and hated when our teacher would bring it up, Gaia decided that was reason enough to make my life miserable. She kept trying to sabotage my grades all throughout school, she destroyed my relationship with your father, and ended up being the one who kidnapped you. But Gaia made it impossible for me to find you. I could never find out where she lived. I never saw her out in public. Whenever I would try to cast a spell to find out where she was, it always led me to some place different."

My anger is a tea kettle screaming inside of me. “I can’t believe that’s why she did all of this. Why? Who does she think she is?” My voice grows louder with each word. In the middle of this, however, I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn to the side. It’s Frankie.

“Gaia’s about to wake up. Idris and I will go take care of her.”

I think for a second and turn back to them, “Wait. Could I talk to her once more?”

Frankie looks at Idris before saying anything. “Yes, but we’ll keep her pinned down.”

Before Gaia can even fully open her eyes, her movement ceases.

I stand over her, looking down and into her eyes. “So... were you *ever* going to tell me that I have a mother? Or were you planning on keeping this a secret forever?”

Gaia looks at me, eyes widened as she tries to move her body but can’t. “Why did you have to leave my cabin? Why couldn’t you just stay?”

I scoff and look down at her in disbelief. “Seriously, Gaia? You’re asking me *why*? Didn’t I already explain enough?”

Her eyebrows lower and pull themselves closer together as her voice raises with madness. “Please, this is all just a misunderstanding! Please, Celeste, let’s go back home!”

I lean down closer to her and laugh in her face. “I am *never* going back to that cabin. I am *never* going to be trapped in there again. I will *not* spend the rest of my life living under the same roof as you just because you are jealous of my mother. Do you hear me?”

Gaia grunts before releasing a blood-curdling scream. Upon hearing this, Frankie snaps her fingers and points at Gaia once more.

I step away. “Goodbye Gaia.”

Gaia’s mouth opens wide and she screams once more. “NOOO!”

With each passing moment, her voice becomes quieter and quieter. A few moments later, there's a flash of light.

She's gone, no longer there to be seen.

I run back to my mother. Frankie and Idris follow behind me. We all huddle together and embrace, feeling at home in each other's arms.