



Loud roars echoed throughout the dark and eerie woods. Tufts of fur and splashes of blood flew in all directions as a young, pure white swan lay injured in the distance, shielding itself with his soft wings. His black tiny eyes watched the bloody scene unfold before him as the massive bear and wolf fought the dance of death. The two predators seemed unfazed by the swan's presence, which was the whole reason for their feud. The wolf just escaped the massive paws of his opponent as he started toward the swan, blood dripping from its bared teeth. The bear rushed to the small creature's defense; but he was too late, the wolf's jaws already clenching the innocent swan's throat.

Avelia Dula woke with a jolt in the middle of the night, pieces of paper stuck to her face. Peeling them off, she realized she had fallen asleep at her desk yet again. She tried returning to her work, but the dream she'd had was still fresh in her mind. The bear and the swan were not at all unfamiliar to her. They'd appeared in her dreams almost every night since she'd arrived at her boyfriend's family castle. But this nightmare was nothing compared to the strange things she thought she saw and heard within the stone walls. Sometimes she thought she heard coats of armor creaking and echoing throughout the empty hallways, and other times she'd swear she heard whispers of people conversing in a nearby room.

Letting the memory of the terrible dream fade away, Avelia looked up and noticed one of the many banners that covered the castle walls. From the dim candlelight, she could barely make out a picture of a howling wolf at the bottom center. She rolled her eyes and shook her head, thinking the wolf in her dream must have come from the decor. The proud Wolfe family flaunted their long heritage to anyone willing to listen. Avelia never inquired of their lineage as genealogy wasn't her forte. Besides, she had enough history to deal with, having just graduated college with her master's in history and was working on the long trek for her Ph.D. Finding a decent topic for her dissertation was the only problem. Of all the subjects she had at her fingertips, nothing seemed to grab her attention. It felt like an endless battle.

With a heavy sigh, Avelia turned in her chair, hoping to resume her sleep in the large canopy bed. Conall, her boyfriend, lay sound asleep as if their argument hours before were a faded memory. At that moment, Avelia didn't recall the exchange of bitter words, just the topic: work.

Conall was a diplomat and flew weekly to other countries. Any time he came home to relax with her, she was always studying or sifting through books in the library. They had no time for each other. She stared at the bed with a solemn expression and sighed.

As she rose from her seat, a strange tapping ticked against the window; a persistent sound—one that seemed to be vying for her attention. Knowing this room was on the fourth floor, she knew there was no way for anyone to be tapping on the window, let alone throwing pebbles. With her heart racing, she slowly turned toward the window, where an outline of a black mass stared at her. It formed into the face of a woman with glowing blue-green skin. Her scaly hands oozed through the window glass toward Avelia as her blood red lips turned up into a devilish smile. Avelia stood frozen in shock as the cold hands wrapped around her throat and squeezed with the strength of a python.

A pounding migraine awoke Avelia from a deep sleep. She raised her head, squinting as the early morning sun peeked into the room. She flicked the sleep from her eyes and tried to remember what had happened to make her feel so terrible. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary. Her desk was just as messy as she'd left it. Her bed was still half slept in, although now empty. Everything was fine; except she lay on the floor with her chair just out of reach. *That must have been one violent dream for me to have fallen out of my chair*, she thought. With her migraine receding and her vision becoming more stable, she grabbed the edge of her desk and lifted herself to her feet. The bright light of the early morning sun brushed against her pale cheek. She frowned, still unable to recall any unusual activity from the night before. Avelia stretched her stiff muscles and looked out the window. The sun peeked over the horizon, just grazing the Burren's rocky terrain. It was the only place in the whole of Ireland that was an intriguing mystery to her. Her eyes drifted toward the lake below; its clear waters glistened in the light. The sparse treetops in a distant field glowed bright neon green. Her rosy lips formed into an exhausted smile as she took in all the beauty. Moments like these, Avelia counted herself lucky, as just a month prior she lived in Dublin, her hometown, struggling to make ends meet.

"Miss Dula, will you be coming to breakfast?" asked the old butler, interrupting her peaceful moment.

Avelia jumped, surprised that even through her daydream she didn't hear the sound of the old creaky door. She turned her attention to the kind servant and replied, her thick Dublin accent echoing around the room, "Of course! I'm sorry, my mind was elsewhere."

"I can see that, miss. Are you all right?"

"Absolutely—why wouldn't I be?"

The old butler blushed with embarrassment, "Oh, no particular reason. But if I might be so bold, you might want to conceal that before arriving at the table."

Confused, Avelia looked back to the window and saw her reflection in the glass. Her long strawberry blond hair stood out at every angle and large bags hung from beneath her gray eyes—and then she saw them: around her neck were fingerprints, as if someone had tried to strangle her. She gasped as last night's event came back to her. Trying to conceal her terror, she looked back at the butler and calmly replied, "Malcolm, please tell Conall I'll be down shortly."

"Right away, miss," the old butler replied as he closed the door, mumbling to himself.

Hurriedly, Avelia threw on a light blue blouse with black slacks then went to the large antique vanity set, hoping to conceal any evidence of sleep deprivation and the attack from the night before. For now, she determined to keep that terrifying event a secret. If Conall knew anything of her dream, he might insist she put a pause on her studies.

Aside from covering up the painful marks, dressing up wasn't Avelia's thing. She much preferred jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, but she was in the presence of high-class people. Conall held the title of *Sir*, just as his father before him. They belonged to a group called The Order of the Wolfe, which, from what little Avelia remembered, went as far back as medieval times, though no one could explain how or why they began. It also kept the birth titles of its members, unlike many orders or traditions in modern times. However, it ended with Conall, since he was the only child born to Sir Matthew Wolfe and his wife, Lady Katherine Donaldson. Lady Katherine still lived in the castle, but she was well up in age and very frail. She'd never cared all that much about her married title or even the order; the love she had for her family was enough to suffice. Avelia admired the older woman for her strength and compassion. Oftentimes, the Lady hinted to Avelia about marriage, but that only happened when her son wasn't around. Both Avelia and Conall

wanted to get married, but with her dissertation and his work in politics, it just wasn't the right time. Fortunately for Avelia, Lady Katherine refused to allow her to spend her whole day cooped up working on her studies. They usually had tea time together by the lake, occasionally throwing pieces of bread to a family of ducks that waddled by.

By the time Avelia reached the grand dining hall, Conall and his mother had already begun diving into the breakfast feast. Avelia glanced up and down the rectangular table, eyeing the different foods laid out. Sausages, porridge with sherry, delectable pastries, and scrambled eggs were but a few of the foods that appealed to Avelia. Were it not for the fancy dishware these foods were perfectly placed on, this breakfast would look like it was merely feeding a large family. However, the servants that stood on hand, waiting for their next instructions, only reminded Avelia how powerful this family was. Avelia always felt nervous about joining in on these meals as she wasn't part of the family, but no one ever intentionally made her feel out of place.

"Good morning, darling!" greeted Conall, his deep Belfast accent making Avelia's heart skip a beat. "Did you sleep well?"

At his words, a smile slowly stretched across her face. Despite their bickering last night, he seemed to want to make amends. Or perhaps it was because his mother was in the room and he didn't want to create a scene. Either way, Avelia was grateful for this reprieve. She casually sat in her chair, trying to ignore the previous night's terrors, and said, "I'm still a little tired."

"How is your research going, Avelia?" asked Lady Katherine, jumping in before Conall could interject.

Avelia stirred her food and, slightly embarrassed by her inattentiveness, replied, "I have yet to find a topic which I find appealing."

Conall took a sip of his morning tea and then said encouragingly, "I'm sure you'll find something, sweetheart."

"Perhaps you could write your dissertation on the medieval times? This castle has so many stories to tell about that era," suggested Lady Katherine, her brittle voice revealing her London origins.

"Now, Mother, I'm sure Avelia would be quite bored with that period. After all, that time was such a mess," said Conall kindly, while his eyes shot a slight look of warning at the Lady.

Avelia didn't understand the silent cues between mother and son, but she knew well enough to stay out of it. She led the conversation in a different direction, hoping the tension in the air would dissipate.

Later, after breakfast, she decided to take her research to the castle library, where shelves of books lined floor to ceiling. Various Wolfe banners and small statues scattered about the room placed ownership of the elegant library. The window itself Avelia found beautiful. A complete stained-glass window of knights on horseback seemed to guard over the ancient tomes. A select few tables with candlesticks sat barren of books. Even the comfortable recliners were coated in a thin layer of dust. She set up shop at one of the many tables which sat in the center of the circular room.

At first, Avelia thought this new research direction was pointless, but then she remembered Lady Katherine mentioning once that every book held in this room was written about the Wolfe family and castle. Unfortunately, she didn't find too much aside from the fact the castle had been around even before the medieval era. The castle had survived many battles, some involving the Druids. One book in particular caught Avelia's attention. The book spoke about every knight who came through Castle Wolfe, some entries having more information than others. As she flipped

through the old pages, she stopped at a unique shield, one with a swan in the center. The name underneath read, *du Lac*. Avelia thought this strange, as it reminded her a lot of *her* surname, Dula. She brushed the idea aside, thinking her surname might be connected to the du Lac family at one time. The man who bore this shield was a warrior during medieval times and fought many battles with some unnamed king. But during the Crusades, he was killed. Just as she was getting into reading the book, she noticed the last page was torn out. Considering the Wolfe's reverence for this library, Avelia was rather surprised they would allow vandalism or even do it themselves.

Avelia closed the book and shook her head, reflecting back to her original thought that the chances of her family being even somewhat related to this knight were astronomical. Besides, if there was mention of her ancestors fighting alongside a king, her father would have mentioned it in his ramblings. But it did make her curious as to why she kept seeing a swan in her dreams. It wasn't like this shield had enough information to write a paper about, let alone a dissertation.

She shoved the books and papers aside and looked out the large window overlooking the lake. As her mind started drifting off into a daydream, Avelia suddenly remembered tea with Lady Katherine and, the last time she checked, it was almost that time. Frantically, she ran out of the room, almost crashing into Malcolm, who called after her. Avelia didn't bother to stop; she already knew he came to tell her of her tardiness. She ran down the cold hallways lined with full suits of armor and naturally, more Wolfe reminders. She eventually jumped down a large, narrow staircase, one of the many scattered throughout the castle, and burst through the newly imported French doors leading out toward the lake.

Breathless, Avelia reached the Lady, who sat in a white lawn chair next to a matching table, calmly sipping her tea.

"My apologies, Lady Katherine, I didn't see the time," said Avelia in between breaths.

The elderly lady smiled and placed the cup and saucer on the table. She then reached for a finger sandwich and replied, "I am simply Katherine, to you. Now, sit down and take a moment to relax."

Avelia smiled at the Lady's calm demeanor. She sat down and silently took her tea. She twinged in mild pain as she turned her neck; the marks may have been hidden, but the pain occasionally broke through.

Noticing her reaction, Lady Katherine gave a sideways glance. "Is there something wrong, dear?"

Avelia looked out at the rippling waters as they lapped against the rocky shoreline. Her eyes drifted toward the edge of the lake and watched the ducks paddling toward them, expecting their usual treats. "I'm not sure."

"Perhaps I may be able to help you? Is it regarding your topic?"

"Maybe," Avelia replied, not certain if she wanted to reveal last night's terror.

The old woman looked out beyond the lake toward the horizon and mused, "The Burren contains many secrets, my dear. Sometimes they grab hold of us and just will not seem to let go."

Avelia stared at the woman, her face growing pale and her heart skipping a beat.

The Lady chuckled and continued. "Yes, child, I know about your encounter last night."

"But . . . how is that possible, that . . . that was just a dream!" Avelia stuttered.

The Lady's tone grew serious. "I have many gifts, one of which is knowing certain things. I know of the woman who attacked you last night. Whatever you do, you must not let her win! Do not let her get inside your head as she did with the others!"

“Woman . . . inside my head . . . others? Katherine, what are you talking about?” Avelia exclaimed fearfully.

An eruption of coughs came from Lady Katherine as she attempted to give Avelia more information. Avelia cried out for the servants, who swiftly came to their lady’s side with medication. The servants lifted the woman to her feet and helped her back into the castle. Avelia stared after, trying to sort out this new puzzle, when the ducks began to quack excitedly. She turned to look at the fleeing creatures to see what they were running from. On the shore across the lake stood a slim, cloaked figure, its face shadowed by a large hood which hung low over its brow. Its hand was raised as if choking the life out of yet another victim. Its negative energy engulfed Avelia in paralyzing fear—just like the previous night.

Her mouth hung open. She completely disbelieved the sight before her. She blinked and the creature vanished without a trace. The ducks waddled back into the lake as if nothing had happened.

Avelia turned back to the castle. The servants she had called to were attending to their duties. Something was wrong. She raced inside to check on Lady Katherine, fearing the worst. Avelia shot down the cold hallways and skipped steps two at a time. When she reached the door to the Lady’s room, she flung it open to see the woman sitting in her chair by the window, focusing intently on her needlepoint.

Lady Katherine curiously looked up above her glasses which threatened to fall off her long nose. “Are you all right, my dear girl?”

Not even a trace of weakness in her voice, or any sign of hoarseness. Avelia collected herself and with her heart racing replied, “I just wanted to see if you were all right. You startled me at tea time.”

Lady Katherine placed her needlepoint on a nearby table and furrowed her thin, white eyebrows. Her gray eyes narrowed in concentration as she replied, “Tea time? I don’t recall that being on our schedule for today.”

“My Lady, we have tea every day,” assured Avelia, her calm demeanor slipping away.

The woman nodded as if trying to recall a forgotten memory. She shook her head and said, “Usually, we do, but you told me you had a lead for your research and requested we postpone our tea time. Is now a good time?”

Avelia swallowed the growing lump in her throat and said in a wavering voice, “Did I happen to mention the topic?”

“Why yes, I believe it was something to do with ancient spirits? Although, I cannot understand why you would write on that. It has nothing to do with your education,” stated the woman in a matter-of-fact tone.

Avelia caught her breath before a scream of terror emerged. Lady Katherine continued rambling on about her opinions of ancient spirits, which left Avelia with one thing on her mind. Last night was no dream; neither was the incident at the lake. They were real happenings, whatever else they were. She resolved to never find out.