



THE BLACK ACT

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WITCH TWINS
BORN

LOUISE BOHMER

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Book 1

WITCH TWINS BORN

By

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**This is a serial fantasy novel that will be released in regular installments. Watch for Book
2: Witch Twins Secrets coming soon.**

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Special thanks to everyone who encouraged me to give this story another chance.

And to Steven--forever and a day.

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Book 1

WITCH TWINS BORN

Ella's final journal entry

A fae never dies nor is one truly born. Each is a seed of Dala. Our planet is alive and its sentience rests in its core.

Our histories tell us the wood people were the first beings to inhabit these lands in the Dalthwein region, near the entrance to Dala's heart core. This world's spirit threaded up through the ground, like the roots of our trees, creating Dala's guardians. The planet manifested slivers of itself into physicality. Bits of root and bark blended with furry pelts, bones, eyes, and teeth. Dala molded legs from mud and moss, skulls from mushrooms, and fingers from the strongest twigs.

Some say the planet was lonely, others believe it wanted to experience itself, existence, from a new perspective. The truth goes back so many millennia, none of us know for certain anymore. If the fae remember these ancient secrets, they aren't telling, and I don't blame them.

Others came from the dirt. It is said we all come from the dirt—wolf, human, crow—and back to the dirt our bodies will go. Dala recycles the spirit as she sees fit. Summerland is a way station for the souls. This is what our people are told.

Fae are sacred, elusive creatures. Most Dalthwein pay great respect to the wood people for their benevolent guidance, the teachings, gifts, and knowledge they've bestowed on us since we came to the Dalthwein region. But my ancestors have spat on their kindness since Corrigan McCleod first led them here.

He took their tribal names away from them, and he led my people far from their coastal homes after King Collidor perished in the great floods. Where Collidor was a loyal and just leader,

Corrigan was an oppressive tyrant. He infected my ancestors, my family, with a curse that refused to die. But with me it ends.

Ella McCleod

Day 96 of the Autumn Quarter

Anna concentrated on her scrying bowl and frowned. She reached beside her to find three dried sage leaves that she added to the stubborn, silent mixture. They bobbed across the dark green surface like tiny boats, but still no clear or distinct visions came to her. This troubled her greatly. Claire was guarding her mind from entrance. Neither sister had ever kept secrets from one another until recently.

Since the death of their guild mother, Grainne, early in the last Winter Quarter, Claire had changed. Now deep into the Spring Quarter with no signs of her sister's grief or her odd behavior, including frequent disappearances from guild classes, waning, she'd started to fear for Claire's mental well being.

Anna had spoken with one of her own teachers, a lower-level scribe elder who'd often acted like a second guild mother to Anna and Claire growing up. But even Rosalind found Claire's erratic ways a bewildering situation.

Together they watched Claire's comings and goings, spying on her in covert concern, trying to discern a reason for her strange disappearances and frequently missed instruction in her beloved and bestowed craft of music. Even Bathsheba, Claire's teacher in the lyrical arts, had expressed equal worry over her absences. Claire's love for music nearly rivaled Anna's love for her own bestowed craft—that of the scribe. The keepers of histories and stories for the guild and for all of the Dalthwein region. There was a time Anna knew her twin had never missed a day of studies.

Claire was slippery in her clandestine escapes, and Anna and Rosalind had little luck in keeping tabs on her comings and goings. Frustrated from the lack of communication, the constant worry, she decided to try a new tactic for gaining entrance into her sister's deeper mind. She'd grown desperate to learn the secrets Claire now tucked into shadowed corners of her psyche.

The murky mixture in her worn birch scrying bowl bubbled slowly, pulling the three sage leaves down into the depths of the potion. As the leaves vanished, the potion boiled faster and the liquid grew opalescent. Anna concentrated and waited.

First came eyes. Yellow eyes, with a lick of orange flame in their depths. She gripped the thick cutting block and squinted. The face that materialized in the small, shimmering pool was a visage woven of both animal and something akin to human—feral, frightening, yet entrancing.

A mahogany-skinned satyr leaped down from the high, thick branches of an old cedar, just as Claire crawled through a cluster of underbrush and greeted him with a shy, somewhat fearful smile.

Anna moved closer to the bowl and watched the two walk toward one another. They were tucked somewhere in the northeast forest near the cabin. She was sure of that. She knew every spot possible for hiding and taking a moment of solitude within the first ten feet of the forest's perimeter.

The northern forests bordered the upper half of the guild lands, wrapping around the northwest and northeast boundaries and stretching across the Dalthwein River. The river separated the wise women's property from fae territory. The northern forests grew lush, barely ever touched by any mortal presence on the other side of the wide, long stretching river.

The dark satyr took Claire into his thick arms of root, bone, and blackest soil. Anna wanted to look away from her scrying after the woodman removed the white kerchief from her sister's russet hair and Claire leaned into him, taking his shaggy face into her pale and calloused hands, bringing him close to kiss him deeply.

After picking the bowl up, she moved to the tiny back door of the cabin she and Claire shared. She opened the creaky pine-board entrance and poured her vision mixture into the grassless earth near the short stoop.

A visit to Rosalind was in order. She needed counsel regarding what she'd just witnessed inside her sister's mind.

She found Rosalind's cabin empty. The scribe elder would be at the guild center, at the scribe's hall. It would have to wait then. Her worry wasn't strong enough to bother her guild mother with when Rosalind was busy doing the history transcriptions.

Afternoon turned to early twilight as Anna walked back to the cabin. Just before she reached the back door, she decided to change direction and veered toward the northeast forest's edge. She didn't want to wander far from their gifted property, but an instinct told her to investigate the patch of land closest to the storage shed.

Traditionally, a wise woman did not receive her gift of property from her guild mother until she'd reached third level initiate status. But, under the circumstances, the higher elders of the guild decreed the young witches should inherit the property not long after Grainne's death. Their third level of initiation was only a short time away, due to take place at the end of this Autumn Quarter, on Samhain morning. With the provision Rosalind watch over her and Claire until their time of third level initiation was completed, they took over the cabin and the patch of land.

Something in her third eye whispered Claire was still in the forest with her secret woodman. This higher instinct pulled her closer to the border of the northeast woods and farther from the meager home she shared with her sister. Her stomach warred with a concoction of emotions—anger, fear, betrayal. What was Claire thinking with her rash, secretive actions?

She remembered the death of their guild mother. While very few witch women chosen for the guild were mother and child by blood, all third level witches, and wise women who hadn't yet reached high elder status, acted as mothers, teachers, to the lower level initiates who were newcomers to the guild lands.

Their guild mother had loved both of them. Yet Anna always felt Grainne paid her sister greater favor. It was, she suspected, the reason Rosalind had stepped in as a bit of a second guild mother to her, in addition to being her scribe teacher. She, too, had been aware of the slight difference in Grainne's affection for her and her sister.

Anna and Claire were different from most wise women lower level initiates, and not just because they were blood sisters and identical twins. They were also the only wise women in the guild lands who were born within the sacred valley nestled between the Dalthwein mountain ranges. Most young girls and witch women within the guild were chosen for their special blood—females born with natural shamanic abilities and innate magical qualities—but Claire and Anna were found as babes, abandoned near the opening of the valley that led into the western pass and on into the lands of the western Dalthwein clans.

It was Grainne and Rosalind, then fourth level initiates of the guild, who found the twin girls nestled in a basket woven from willow branches and covered by a grey wool blanket. When the elders of the guild discovered the twins held the prized witch blood in their veins, they were welcomed into the guild, and it was decided Grainne would act as their guild mother and serve as the babes' primary caregiver and teacher. Rosalind would act as a secondary mother.

Anna heard a rustling low in the underbrush near her feet and she stopped, standing as still as a pursued animal trying to make itself unseen in the tall grass. She caught the scent of rich, wet earth. Then she heard laughter, Claire's laughter, low and filled with wild abandon.

An old cedar four trees to her right swayed back and forth and an animal-like *whooping* call drifted from the top of its shaggy, outstretching branches. Anna jumped, gathered her arms across the bib of her white apron, and scoured the trees in the direction of the movement. She caught the woodman with her gaze as he leaped to a tree farther back in the edge of the woods. His yellow eyes stared back at her from his new perch. Amber orbs in a face crowned with horns of black and a vulpine smile of sharp, pointed teeth. The satyr from her scrying bowl.

Claire stumbled from the bushes in front of her. When she met her sister's glance upward, Anna saw doubt and a raw fear in Claire's deep green eyes. Just briefly, Anna had seen something primal and more akin to forest folk than human in her twin's prolonged stare.

"What are you doing, sister?" Anna shocked herself with the ferocity of her words. She spat them at her twin and grabbed Claire by the arm, yanking her from the cover of underbrush.

"Let go of me," Claire whined and yanked herself free of Anna's grasp. "Give me a moment. Let me straighten myself, please?"

Claire tidied her drab muslin dress and took her bib apron from one of the side pockets of her skirts, looping it back over her head and tying it in place. Now Anna took hold of her twin again and drew her near. She did not give her sister time to fix her badly tousled hair or to replace her small, white hair kerchief.

"Who was that woodman I saw you with?" Anna shook her sister. "He is not of the northern forests. What were you doing with him?"

Claire bit her bottom lip then frowned. “How do you know he is not of the northern forests?”

Anna didn’t have to read her mind to know her sister was trying to evade the true nature of the inquiry between them.

“Who was he? I could smell his scent and it was not of our woods. It had the smell of wild, south forest blood to it.”

Claire jerked her arm away.

“What business is it of yours anyway?” Wild green flame seemed to dance in Claire’s narrow-eyed glare. “You were spying on me. Are you jealous? Is that why I can have no privacy from you?”

The remark hit Anna’s heart with an odd kind of hurt. It was unexpected, and it wounded something deeper in her that she tucked away, not ready to look at that part of herself quite yet. Without warning, she reached back and brought her open palm forward with as much force as she could find within. Claire yelped when Anna’s hand met her cheek. She staggered backward a few steps, unable to gain her balance fast enough to prevent herself from falling back into the underbrush she’d just crawled from.

Anna moved over her quickly, pinning her sister to the ground with her black boots, holding down the loose fabric on the arms of Claire’s dress.

“Do you realize what you do, laying with him? I would not have had to spy on you, were you not hiding your mind from me ever since Mother Grainne’s death.”

At this Claire turned her head away, and Anna caught the tears that fell as her twin’s guilty gaze drifted off. She stepped from Claire’s sleeve and swung her leg over her sister’s prone body then knelt.

“You sacrifice your position as a wise woman within the guild if you bond with a lover, if you take any vow of bonding. You know that.”

Claire swiped the tears from her face and turned back to Anna, scowling now. Anna shuddered at the coldness in her twin’s eyes.

“Who says I wish to bond with him? It’s nothing but a secret affair, sister. I will end it soon enough and no one within the guild will be any the wiser to my actions.”

Anna snorted in disgust and stood, crossing her arms over the bib of her apron as she scowled down at Claire, giving her twin no help as she righted herself to her feet.

“You are a fool, and you’ll be filled with much regret one day if you continue this way—so callous and rash.”

With that, Anna turned away from Claire, who adjusted the wispy white kerchief over her tidied hair, re-plaited and gathered in a large red bun at the nape of her neck. Anna intended to leave her sibling to her own defenses, walk back to the cabin, when something farther down the tree line and directly ahead of her caught her attention.

She heard Claire shuffle behind her and gasp as she mumbled something. Anna knew her sister had seen the phantom too, that it was no trick of her angry, chaos-filled mind.

A red-haired woman who resembled Claire stood about ten feet from them, her transparent hand resting on the wrinkled bark of a dying cottonwood. Anna swallowed and closed her eyes. Taking in a deep breath, she attempted to read the specter’s energy—taste it and feel it for the hint of any insidious intent. But Anna could pick up nothing from the green-cloaked ghost. It was well aware of its state of death and it was guarding its sentience carefully. Frustrated, she gave up and opened her eyes, staring at the phantom.

Claire stood beside her now. Anna turned to her sister and found she too studied the tall, translucent apparition. Was she reading anything off the mysterious woman? Anna tried to reach into her twin’s mind, but found Claire slapped her third eye away.

Anna grabbed her twin’s arm and shook her. “Are you speaking with her? Who is she?”

Claire sneered at her, almost growled, and Anna fought the urge to slap the feral appearance off her sister’s face. Claire composed herself quickly, obviously sensing Anna’s inward reaction, and whispered while lowering her gaze to the grass, “I do not know. She does not speak to me either.”

Anna stared at her sister's face, tried to access her mind again, but Claire pushed her out. Her frustration growing into anger, she yanked her around by the arm, making Claire stand to face her.

“You lie. You may not allow me into your thoughts, but your eyes still betray you as a liar.”

Claire struggled and snatched herself from Anna's grip. Anna watched her sister stare back at the spot where the phantom hovered a scant inch above the dirt. A lump formed in her throat, trying to choke her.

The specter woman had disappeared. Anna took a step forward, cocking her head and listening for the voice of any stray ghosts. It was highly uncommon to see a restless spirit outside of the Tunnels of the Dead—an intricate network governed by the People of the Woods and used for containment of willful undead. A spirit seen outside of the vast catacombs was usually a troublesome wraith indeed. While Anna could not see, feel, smell or hear any lurking phantom energies, her greater witch instincts told her something still watched them from the long-stretching tree line.

She turned to Claire to ask if she felt anything left behind as well, but found her twin sprinted away from her and her questions as fast as she could, holding her skirts above her ankles to help her move even more swiftly. She sighed, twisting and turning the starched white cloth of her apron as she did so. Head down, she walked back to their home. Worry made her chest heavy, constricted, and it was a strain to breathe.

Rosalind bit her lip, and Anna held her breath, waiting for her mentor's reaction.

"Perhaps she wishes to leave the guild." The older woman said the words gently, voicing Anna's fears.

She was grateful for her teacher's soothing energy. "That's what I fear." She looked to her fidgeting hands folded in her lap. "If she wants a life outside the wise women's guild that's fine." Anna met her scribe elder's kind gaze with tears blurring her vision. "I'd be happy for her, and I'd understand her decision to take a lifemate through a vow of bonding. But why keep this affair a secret? She also admitted to me it was nothing more than a tryst to her. Why is she not coming to us, to the guild, for permission to leave her guardian service?"

Rosalind leaned forward in her willow wicker chair and squeezed Anna's hands.

"Perhaps she was afraid you wouldn't understand? That you would be angry with her for wanting to leave. You've always been so close. Maybe Claire was trying to spare your feelings."

"Can she become seeded by a woodman?" The thought struck Anna's heart unexpectedly. "Dear Dala, what will the guild do if she becomes heavy with his halfling child?"

Rosalind stroked her cheek, wiping away the tears that now spilled from Anna's eyes.

"No. Don't worry. A witch woman can only become heavy with a woodman's child if she steals a piece of his essence, and that is highly frowned upon by the guild. You should remember that from your teachings."

At this, Rosalind stood and went to the smoldering hearth to stoke the embers of wood and add another large wedge of dry pine to the fire.

"No, if she chooses to take a vow of bonding with a woodman she won't only have to give up her guardian duties. Claire also gives up her rights to any offspring by him, and she'll have quite an adjustment ahead of her living with the wood people. Their ways are very different from ours here in the guild."

Anna nodded and took the steaming mug of soothing mint tea Rosalind handed her. She watched the lower elder pour a mug for herself from a piping hot cast-iron kettle then set it back over the fire.

“She knows this, too. Perhaps that’s the reason for her secrets? Perhaps this truly is a meaningless tryst to her.”

Rosalind set her tea down. She walked to where Anna sat on the bench on the left side of the hearth. Bending, Rosalind placed a soothing kiss atop her head then lowered to sit beside her. Together, they sat in silence for a moment, staring into the small blaze now cheerily burning in the stone hearth. The kettle’s bubbling tune was all that lightened the heavy, thoughtful quiet.

Anna took a long, soothing drink of her tea and then asked, “What will the higher elders do to Claire if they learn of her,” she bit her lip, pausing before she added, “actions?”

Rosalind rubbed her knees through her skirts and sighed heavily. “It’s hard to say for sure.”

“Will they send her into exile? To the lands in the south?”

Rosalind shook her head, but Anna saw the deep worry in the lower elder’s face, felt the anxious emotions drifting from her heart and mind.

“No, child. I doubt they’ll go as far as to send her to the exiles. They may cast her out of guild service, but they won’t leave her helpless or banished.”

“I wish she would come to you for guidance with this.” Anna rubbed her forehead in an attempt to assuage the pain building in her third eye. She’d overstrained trying to gain access to Claire’s mind this past week. Now it was catching up with her. “Why is she shutting me out if it’s nothing more than a secret tryst she plans ending soon? I swear to you, Rosalind, I’ve never seen a woodman like hers.”

Rosalind stood, walking slowly back to the bench opposite them to retrieve her tea.

“It’s quite possible he’s of the southern forests. How you describe him sounds as such. Mind you, don’t jump to conclusions about the wood folk of the southern woods. Yes, it’s true they’re

of a wilder nature, but that doesn't make them all untrustworthy tricksters. And some wood folk do migrate from their birth forest to others within the valley. It is not that uncommon, love."

Anna nodded and forced a weak smile. While she was grateful for Rosalind's calming, rational words, Anna couldn't alleviate that last small knot of dread tightening her stomach. Claire's actions were growing more and more erratic these days, and there were some rumors stirring within the guild.

It all started in the last Winter Quarter, when Grainne's death from the plague that swept through the valley and northern Dalthwein village forced them into a time of quarantine. She, Claire, and Rosalind had been among the wise women spared from the frightening sickness that had decimated the guild and the northern Dalthwein clans. Yet, some days, Anna still feared she'd lost her twin to death also when Grainne succumbed.

Claire carefully pushed through a tangle of wild berry bushes, trying not to snag herself on any of the thorns nor break any of the thin branches. This would be her third music lesson missed in seven days, and her teacher, Bathsheba, would be sure to lecture her when she attended her next class with the lower elder. She'd suffer those consequences in three days' time. Today she wanted to see Luthien, and nothing would keep her from their pre-planned meeting in the woods, near to where the Dalthwein River ran through the forest.

The river forked off farther into the woods and flowed onward in smaller branches that went off northwest, flowing into the Lake of Dala, then running down through the Dalthwein Mountains where it went underground into the caves that joined up with the Tunnels of the Dead. From there the Dalthwein River formed natural hot springs and split into three separate channels, one of which provided a water source for the western Dalthwein clans.

Claire sat on a moss-covered boulder a few feet from the river. She watched the water, sparkling with honey-golden light from the lazy afternoon sun, as she waited for her woodman to arrive.

Luthien had saved her life when she became lost in the rage of a blizzard during the Winter Quarter, running mad and seeking answers or death after Grainne died in her arms.

Anna had been outside, gathering snow to boil for water. Left alone with her ailing mother, Claire remained close to Grainne's driftwood cot. They'd pulled their mother's small bed closer to the stone hearth when she'd grown chilled with the fever. Though her body burned hot, Grainne trembled and sweated. Her teeth chattered as if she were freezing, at times even in her sleep.

That day, Claire sat wrapped in a blanket on the bench placed on the other side of their stone hearth. She'd been watching Grainne enjoy her first restful sleep in weeks when her guild mother's eyes snapped open and her face grew taut and white. Throwing the covers back, she pitched forward and vomited on the worn pine-board floor. Black blood and bile pooled around Grainne's feet.

The dread of her mother's impending death didn't last long. She couldn't afford that luxury when Grainne was so miserably ill. Dashing from the bench, Claire gathered cloths to clean up the mess.

When Grainne was washed and wrapped in a woolen blanket, Claire went to get a clean nightgown for her mother and fresh blankets for the cot. But Grainne cried out just as Claire pulled back the thin curtain that led to the bedroom she and Anna shared. The only other room in the small cabin. She dropped the curtain and spun around, running to her mother.

Naked and shivering, Grainne stumbled from the cot and came toward her.

"I cannot go yet." Angry boils, a symptom of the plague, marred her stomach, legs, and arms. She licked her ravaged lips and winced when she ran her tongue over a large fever blister.

"Claire, please come here. Those other things can wait. I have something I need to tell you."

At this, Grainne collapsed to her knees on the floor. She reached a shaky hand out to stop herself from falling face first into the boards.

Claire snatched the clean blanket from her mother's cot and gathered it about Grainne. With tender words, she eased her mother back on to the cot, covering her to the neck and tucking the blanket tightly around her wasted body.

“Where’s Anna?” Grainne swallowed. It pained Claire to watch the effort it took her mother to speak just three short words.

“She’s outside gathering snow in the tin tubs. The well’s frozen over. We’ll have to make due until this storm passes.”

Grainne blinked slowly and swallowed again. “There’s no time for you to go get her. Promise me you’ll share with her what I am about to tell you?”

Claire nodded. “Of course, Mother. Anything you ask.” She ran a hand down Grainne’s hot, dry cheek.

Grainne forced a smile that Claire could see pained her. She was so frail, such a shell of her once robust self. She ran a weak hand part way down Claire’s face before it fell back to her chest.

“You and Anna...you were always told that Rosalind and I found you in the western pass abandoned as babes.” Grainne paused to catch breath and Claire waited, nodding to show she’d understood and heard.

Grainne closed her eyes and seemed to fight something within her for a moment before she continued. Claire couldn’t tell if it was the illness or something else. She held her breath and took her mother’s withered hand, holding it tight.

“That’s a lie, child.” Her eyelids fluttered open and she gazed at Claire. “A lie told to protect you and your sister until the time was right to tell you the truth. Rosalind and I were to tell you the real story of your birth on the eve of your initiation. I won’t see that time now, and I cannot die with this secret still kept in my heart.”

Claire felt her tears falling now and she leaned forward to kiss Grainne’s clammy forehead.

“Please, don’t say that.”

“I’m afraid it’s true.” She smiled sadly, and there was a finality in her stare Claire couldn’t deny. She folded her hands in her lap and remained silent. “Please, let me tell you this before death comes for me.” Her hand reached up to touch Claire’s face. “You’re not only my daughters appointed by the guild. You and Anna are my daughters by birth.”

Claire's heart forgot to beat for a moment. She swallowed over what felt like a knife lodged in her throat.

“How...why would you keep something like that from us? I know not many guild mothers and wise women are mother and daughter by birth, but it's never been kept secret from those who have been in the past.”

Her mother looked away. Claire felt her heart lurch in her chest when she saw tears fall from Grainne's bloodshot eyes.

“Your birth was very different.”

Claire shook her head. She felt cold all over though the fire raged merrily beside her. “I don't understand.”

Grainne heaved a shaky sigh and paused before she could continue. “There's so much to tell and this is so difficult. I should leave this for Rosalind. I've no right doing this without her. She and I made a promise.”

Claire leaned forward over her mother and took her face gently in her hands. She could barely see Grainne through the tears that now flooded her eyes.

“Tell me, please.”

“I fell in love with a woodman.” She closed her eyes and a few body wracking sobs escaped Grainne. “I committed a black act against the guild. I stole a piece of his essence to conceive the two of you. I didn't want to leave my guardian duties to be with him, but I didn't want to give him up either. That doesn't justify what I did, but I'm not saying I would change it either.”

Claire knelt by the side of the cot and gathered her mother into her arms. So many questions shrieked in her mind, but she would never get to ask them of Grainne now. A part of Claire was angry at her guild mother as much for her admission as she was for the lie itself. A part of her hated her for it, but she pushed that deep down and refused to admit it at such a time.

Grainne pulled away and kissed Claire's forehead.

“I tell you this for more than an admission of my own secrets, child. You see, our bloodline is prone to this wandering, the transgression I committed. I don’t want you to make the same mistakes I did. The mistakes of your grandmother before me.”

The sickness took Grainne again and she pitched forward, vomiting fresh blood. Claire held her until the sickness passed, and then Grainne collapsed back onto her pillows, paler than the moon and shivering violently.

“I must go get you more blankets and a nightdress,” Claire said.

She gently eased herself away from Grainne, now tucked deep beneath her blanket. After slipping away from the cot, she retrieved fresh blankets and a nightdress from the cupboard. She would need more cleaning rags as well to wipe up the vomit.

It was when she returned, stooping down to her knees beside the cot to wake Grainne, that she found her mother had passed. Claire couldn’t rouse her, and when she turned Grainne gently to her back she found her eyes distant and clouding. Her chest was still.

Claire’s screams had brought Anna in from the small enclosed porch on the front of the cabin. She was bundled in many scarves, a woolen hat, and winter cloak when she came stumbling in, wild eyed and soaked with blowing snow.

“Dear Dala,” Anna said, pulling the tangle of scarves from her mouth. “She’s gone, isn’t she?”

Claire let out a wail that made Anna jump back and drop the heavy water canister she was carrying. Claire picked herself up from where she’d been kneeling by her mother’s cooling corpse. She was lost in her mind’s turmoil, buried deep in the emotions and questions swirling in her brain as wildly as the storm outside.

Everything hit her in a tumult and she had to run. She had to be anywhere but there. Claire needed to get outside. She needed to run into the snow, into oblivion. Madness, rage, a mixture of painful emotions that came together to form a dangerous potion in her heart and mind took her over.

“She’s taken everything from me and left me with nothing,” she screamed. Her face contorted as the sobs broke and washed over her body. “She dies with secrets on her lips, and I inherit the questions. But she left us with no answers, Anna. No answers.”

Claire shook Anna, but when she saw the fear in her twin’s bewildered stare she let her go. Everything moved in on her and Claire felt as if she’d faint. She had to get away now. Run fast, anywhere.

She ran out the cabin door, right into the heart of the worst storm of the Winter Quarter with her sister calling after her, begging her to come back.

Luthien’s arrival startled Claire from her memories and she was glad of it. Thinking of Grainne’s death only left her frustrated and with far more questions than answers. He jumped down from a lower branch of the sky-sweeping cedar behind her. She gasped in surprise and he flashed a smile filled with pointed teeth that always reminded her of a wolf.

The dark satyr thrilled her, yet a small part of her found him utterly terrifying, too, but in an odd, almost enchanting way. It was hard to describe, but the emotions he conjured within her heart and mind and body, the glimmers he wove around her with whispered words of seduction, gave her a sensation somewhat akin to fear, but far closer to an unbridled bliss she didn’t quite understand. Being with him, sometimes Claire could forget she was human and he of another kind all together.

“I’ve missed you.” Luthien stroked her cheek. Claire shivered at his soft yet slimy touch. The palms of his hands were much like the texture of a mushroom. “Why did you take so long to return? I’ve been waiting ages for a whisper from your mind.”

Claire bowed her head and let out a sigh. “My sister.”

She looked up and Luthien cocked his head, his mossy brow furrowed deep. When he said nothing, Claire assumed he waited for her to continue. She took a deep breath before she spoke.

“Anna isn’t pleased about our affair. She was very angry when she confronted me.”

Luthien folded his muscled form of rich mahogany, dirt, moss, and bone and sat on the boulder Claire had occupied. She sat at the base of it and leaned her body against the length of his furry leg. Cold fingers touched her face as her satyr lover brushed her hair with his broken claws.

“Why does she disapprove of us so?” His voice was deep and old, and in combination with his icy touch it made her shudder.

“I’m not doing things as I should. As she thinks I should.” Claire turned and looked up at Luthien. “How are the rules observed between fae in the south forests and the exiles camp? Are there not laws on the vows of bonding an exile can take with one of the wood folk there, also?”

His hand stopped its movement through her russet curls and he frowned deeply, his skin pulling tight across his sharply defined features.

“Not really,” he said. “Since our council broke from the rule of northern woodland royalty, we’re very much removed from most of their rules and their ways. Much as the exiles don’t observe wise women customs since their banishment.”

Claire nodded and slowly turned her head. As a second level initiate in the wise women’s guild, she knew much of the histories of the wood people and the Dalthwein clans. Her people had long lived in a peaceful and mutually beneficial co-existence with the fae. She had studied the histories of the guild from birth, but much on the great rebellion within the guild, led by a traitor wise woman known as Glenna Straffordshire, was kept from lower level initiates, left for them to study in depth when they reached their first level of lower elder status.

All any initiate of the guild knew was that in the earlier times of the guild, some one hundred and three revolutions gone by, Glenna Straffordshire led an uprising of young initiate wise women against the laws of the guild and the fae within the sacred valley. She and the rebels who followed her were exiled from the guild and from returning to any of their Dalthwein home villages. The women were branded as outcasts for their treason, and sentenced to a life within the wastelands found at the end of the rocky, barren southern pass.

At this same time of disrupt within the guild, the southern wood people decided to segregate themselves from the other tribes of fae. They denounced the long standing rules of northern woodland royalty, whose council chambers were located in the northern forests. The council’s

apex was found across the Dalthwein River, in the largest section of the northern forests that was separated from the heart of the valley by the long-stretching river.

Claire knew from her lessons within the guild that since the time of dissent and much separation, the southern lands were considered dangerous. Most of the Dalthwein clans avoided this area and the southern pass, even when making trade and supply trips across the routes designated for human passage through the valley. A massive gate made of oak beams and stone was erected in the southern pass by the clans, giving the guild lands and the valley added protection from the wilder wastelands to the south.

Over the many revolutions that passed, memories of those bitter days settled, and the fae, at least, formed somewhat of a peaceful treaty between their peoples again. Still, the migration of southern wood people into the north, west, or east forests was strictly monitored by woodland royalty.

Luthien had confessed to Claire, not long after he saved her life last Winter Quarter, that he hadn't been granted refuge in the northeast woods. He'd smuggled himself over forest borders to come here and lived in hiding for the time being.

He broke the silence that drifted like pungent smoke between them.

"Do you know if Anna's told others about us?"

She shook her head. "We haven't spoken much since she confronted me."

Luthien played with the small tuft of dirt-and-root beard sprouting from his pointed chin. "Are you going to stop coming to see me?"

He bowed his head and Claire was surprised to see what appeared to be hurt marring the satyr's features. Her stomach knotted and her heart warred with duty over pleasure, back and forth, arguing with itself until she felt sick and exhausted.

"I don't want to," she whispered, taking his cold hand in hers. "I really don't know what to do." She looked up into his eyes and pleaded silently for his help.

Luthien jumped up from the boulder and stood stone still, watching something straight ahead. Claire followed his gaze, and when she caught a glimpse of the phantom woman she bit her lip hard enough to taste blood. It was the same spectral lady who'd visited her and Anna. Wearing the same transparent cloak of green, the ghost stared at her and Luthien with a smug smile on her wispy face.

“Who is she?” Claire gathered herself close to his chest and watched the phantom. “Anna and I have seen her as well. She caused us no harm with her visit, but a restless spirit wandering from the tunnels is never a good omen.”

“No. No it isn't.”

Luthien's deep voice was clipped, almost afraid. It struck Claire with a harsh and unwelcome shock. For a wild man of the south woods to show dread at the presence of a spirit was strange. She felt the knots in her gut pull tighter.

“Do you know the woman?”

Luthien shook his head then muttered, “No,” but when he turned to face her she could see the lie fading slowly from his glowing stare.

“Are you sure about this, Rosalind?”

Anna looked from the tattered scrolls of parchment to the leather tome open before her. Its paper greeted her with a whispering white page, begging her to take pen and ink and begin her work.

“Quite sure.” Rosalind nodded, but there was a strange glaze to her brown eyes that disturbed Anna. “I trust you. You are a gifted wise woman. Lower level initiate or not, I think you’re ready for this. Perhaps you should consider it a test.”

With that, Rosalind walked to the stone hearth. Its fire burned low at the end of the main scribe room. She poured tea into tin cups and brought these to Anna’s scribing tablet.

Rosalind was working on transcriptions of the guild’s creation history, copying the original documents from the beginning of the wise women guardian sect into more durable leather tomes, to be stored in the Hall of Records where all the combined histories of the Dalthwein region were kept. The Hall of Records was housed in the elder’s land, and only lower level elder scribe teachers were allowed to walk within the elder’s land to retrieve the parchments.

The scribe elder had asked Anna to take over transcribing the guild’s creation history—a story now two hundred and thirty revolutions past. Anna was not only shocked, she was frightened by her scribe teacher’s odd request. Gifted or not, as a second level lower initiate to the guild, she truly didn’t feel comfortable transcribing such precious documents.

Anna thanked her for the tea and took a sip before carefully setting it down far away from the worn scrolls.

“You really think I’m ready for this? That I should be handling a transcription such as this? You only allow ninth level initiates and lower elder scribes to work with our oldest documents.”

“That’s usually the way, yes. But something tells me this should be your job. We’ll find out the reasons for your assignment later, I’m sure. Don’t look so scared. It’s an honor I bestow upon you with this duty.”

Rosalind smiled, but Anna didn't like the fact her guild mother was avoiding direct eye contact with her. She wanted to look into Rosalind's mind, but to probe a lower elder's mind when only a second level initiate, without good reason or permission, was a taboo of the guild.

Since the death of Grianne, why did it feel like everyone was keeping some kind of secret from her? She sighed, and as Rosalind walked farther down the long room to her own tablet and chair, Anna put her tea aside and started assessing the work ahead of her.

That night after meeting with Luthien, Claire dreamed of the phantom woman from the northeast woods.

Blood was spilled. An elder wise woman died as the phantom woman, made flesh in Claire's night visions, plunged her sacred dagger through the woman's heart.

The ground opened up and ate the witch women whole.

Claire woke and found she was softly sobbing in her sleep. She chanced a peek over at Anna's cot, illuminated by the tiny sliver of light filtering in from the twin moons. One was nearly full, but the Samhain Moon showed only half of its silver face to the Dalthwein region. It wouldn't bloom round and fat until the Final Harvest festivals began and the New Year was ushered into the lands. While the larger Dalthwein moon bloomed full every forty days, the smaller silver moon only bloomed full once every revolution, rising round and ripe on the eve of Samhain.

"Why did you show yourself to them?" Luthien lunged at her, trying to grasp the phantom, but she only laughed cruelly and drifted farther from him.

Angered by her flippancy, he whispered a chant to weave a glamour about her and she became fleshier—more of blood and bone than of dust. Luthien grabbed her about the throat and pulled her close.

"You can play games, witch woman." He snarled. "I can too."

"Let me go."

She clawed at his gnarled hands of darkest bark. Luthien let his grip relax and she fell to the forest floor. Coughing, her body shuddered as it melted like candle wax and grew transparent once more. "I have a plan, a new plan." The wind of death returned to her voice.

He glared at her, crossing his arms over his mossy chest. "We have a deal. Before any new plan is decided on, I'll hear it first and have final say."

She nodded, but she was obviously outraged at his brusque treatment. "You might want to remember though, woodman." She drifted behind a cottonwood. "You need my assistance as much as I need yours. We're both at one another's mercy, don't forget."

His shoulders slumped. She'd trumped a small victory over him. He did need her to consummate his desires as much as she needed him to revive her ancient plans. They were entwined, dependent on each other for their ultimate goals, whether Luthien liked it or not.

He owed it to her to hear this new plan out. After all, it was she who'd helped him sneak across the borders into the northeast forests. She who'd helped him escape persecution for his crimes against the southern fae tribes.

"What is this new plan you speak of then, witch woman?" He sighed and perched on a cedar stump.

She floated from behind the tree and whispered, "I want to lead her to the exiles' camp. That's why I showed myself to her. There's something I need of your beloved before you can have her to yourself completely."

He cocked his head and frowned then scratched his chin. Luthien didn't like being at a disadvantage, but he was buried deep in his own treacheries and she knew it, knew it all. He couldn't turn back now. He'd do as she bid.

Anna started dreaming of their creation history three nights after Rosalind assigned her the transcriptions.

At first, she woke disoriented and moving in a shroud of darkness. It took Anna a moment to realize she was still asleep, her psyche confusing the lucid vision with the waking world.

Looking down at herself, her spirit now adjusted to the levels of darkness and, now aware, Anna noted she couldn't see her hands. No trace of her was visible. She'd come here unseen to witness something from the past only the deeper dreaming world could show her. Quickly she drifted forward to assess her new surroundings.

She was in a covered wagon. Spread out on long wooden boards in the back were furs and woolen blankets, and beneath lay a sleeping, mid-age Dalthwein woman, her arms loosely wrapped around a slumbering dark-haired boy.

Voices drifted in from the front of the wagon and Anna slowly moved that way to listen. She neared the oval opening in the durable canopy and strong shafts of bright silver moonlight spilled in. Two moons sat almost full in the star-jeweled sky, and she knew the time in her dream-vision was close to Samhain.

“Why do you resent them so much, Papa? And my curiosity about them? Our blood—the unique properties a Dalthwein witch woman carries—is the reason our people were granted sanctuary in these lands.” Silence for a moment, and then the female voice added, “You and my uncles are so ungrateful. They've done so much for us, yet so many men in our McCleod tribe continue to belittle and spit on their kindness. They gift their teachings to all Dalthweins, not just witch women.”

“Are you quite finished now, daughter?” The voice was deep, gruff and cold. It made Anna's spirit ripple with a slight shiver. She knew this man's voice, yet it was strange and new to her as well. “How you go on. You'd think I'd committed some great treason against the wood people to hear you talk. That the men in our tribe despise them.” There was a bitter chuckle from him at this. “That isn't so, and you know it. True, I and your grandfather may have thrown questions at

some of their rules while gathered around our hearths, but have any of us attacked the sacred peoples? No, we certainly have not.”

Softly, his daughter whispered, “In beginning times, the first among the McCleod tribe did. Our family was almost sent into exile for it. What, do you not remember that from our history, Father?”

Silence rolled in and blanketed the two people sitting in the front of the wagon. Anna looked between the tense faces of father and daughter and a sinking knot of dread settled in her gut. She knew where she was and she knew who these people were. From her transcription work on the creation history, she had no doubt of it. Anna sat in the wagon of Goddard McCleod. The man who’d once attempted to curse the fae with his malice. His daughter, Drea McCleod, sitting in the front of the wagon with him, would become the first wise woman.

Anna was witnessing the annual Samhain trip the Dalthwein clans once made into the heart of the sacred fae valley. The trip was no longer allowed, for now the wise women performed those same duties and ritual honors to the fae at the time of Final Harvest, serving as a conduit between the clans and the sacred valley. While fae and mortal were often in contact, no mortal other than a female holding witch blood and initiated into the guild was allowed to live within the sacred valley, since the long ago transgressions of Goddard and Drea McCleod.

A witch woman never had such a lucid dream without good reason. Anna sensed last night’s vivid encounter in the dream world with Goddard and Drea held a message for her, some omen or portent. The dream had ended too quickly for her to discern many answers. She was left with pieces of the puzzle that did not quite fit together, not quite yet. She needed more information.

Convinced that her sister’s odd behavior was somehow connected to her experience, Anna prepared herself for Claire’s return from her music lessons. Anna had missed her work at the scribe’s hall and her daily lessons with Rosalind for the first time since her various initiate trainings had begun. She’d stayed home to ponder the dream vision, her sister’s strange actions, and how the two fit together.

Not to mention, why had Rosalind asked her to take on the job of transcribing the guild's creation history? Granted, she was an advanced initiate, and many of Anna's teachers had told her just that, but she didn't feel ready for a task as daunting and delicate as the creation history transcriptions. Rosalind's behavior had seemed out of character that day she'd assigned her with the task.

Anna chewed on her short thumbnail. She watched Claire come over the crest of the green knoll that dipped down and led into the main center of the lands. Lands the wise women's guild were gifted long ago by the wood people, in return for guarding the borders of the sacred valley.

Things were not adding up, and the energy in the valley seemed subtly different somehow, as if something sinister and suffocating was lurking in their pristine air and homes. When Anna heard Claire's boots coming up the front porch steps, she knew it was time to sit her twin down and demand some answers.

Anna stood with hands on hips, staring hard at Claire as she came through the door. Her twin hummed a tune they were both fond of in childhood—an old favorite folk song of the guild's younger members. It was often used by Grainne or Rosalind to soothe them as children, and hearing her sister hum it almost weakened Anna's resolve for confrontation today, but she swept angrily at the pang in her heart, smothering it instead with her desperate need for some answers.

“Have you been with him again?”

Claire whirled around, her eyes wide, obviously startled to find Anna home. When she recovered, she returned Anna's glare.

“No. Actually, I've been to my music lessons. Ask Bathsheba tomorrow, when you see her in the guild center on the way to your own classes. Which, by the way, you should be at right now, should you not?” Claire raised an eyebrow. “What are you doing home already? You've never been one to skip a day of guild training.”

Anna dropped her gaze and picked at the skirt of her white bib apron. She went to fill two tin cups with water from the kettle, now boiling over the hearth.

“I had visions last night in my dreams—vivid, strong.” Her voice cracked. The recalled emotions tried to choke her. “I believe the secrets you’ve been keeping from me are connected.” She lifted her head and held her sister’s narrowed-eyed stare. “We need to talk and we are going to talk today, right now. I want to know what Grainne said to you when she died, and why you’ve been keeping it from me. I want to know what happened to you after you left here that night, running like a mad woman into a blinding blizzard that should have killed you, witch blood in your veins or not.” Tears came. “I need answers, Claire. I need to know why a twin I was once so close to is now shutting me out of her deepest mind and heart.”

Claire broke into sobs that wracked her body. She dropped her leather satchel of lesson books. She took a few steps forward and embraced Anna with arms that trembled, clinging tight to her back and waist.

“I’ll tell you everything,” Claire managed to whisper. “I’m so very, very sorry, my dear sister. I promise, I’ll tell you everything.”

Gratefully, Claire took the steaming black tea Anna handed her. She stared into the fire blazing in the stone hearth. Where to start? She looked into Anna’s deep green eyes, mirroring Claire’s in their brilliant emerald shade, and words wouldn’t come.

How could she tell her dear sister that their guild mother had lied to them all their life? That Grainne had died leaving Claire with a truth she herself still struggled with and wanted answers to, but was too afraid to ask for them and didn’t even know where to begin? How could she tell Anna Grainne was their birth mother, not an appointed guardian of the guild? It would shatter Anna’s idea of truth, her peaceful reality, and leave her filled with more questions than answers, just as the knowledge had done to her.

After a long drink, Claire opted instead to begin with the story of her disappearance, and how she survived in that blinding blizzard the night of their mother’s death.

She’d tell her sister about Luthien first, explain the strange story of how the woodman saved her life, how she was drawn to him over and over. After that, she’d ease out the deeper truth

gnawing at her heart, even though she knew it would tear Anna's ordered, beautiful existence apart. For that, a part of Claire already grieved as she cleared her throat and prepared.

Claire stumbled in the snow. She was just past the storage shack at the end of their scrap of land when she thought about turning back to her sister's frantic pleas and the warmth of the cabin. But something wild, an unbridled grief and rage pushing her ever forward, wouldn't let her flee back to safety. Claire needed to be in the forest. She was the daughter of a woodman after all, was she not? Was that not what her dying mother just confessed to her?

Dear Dala bless me. I'm a halfling.

Fresh tears blurred her vision. Icy wind scraped its wintry fingers over her skin, freezing the moisture running down her cheeks.

Her mother had broken a cardinal rule of a mortal and fae's bonding. She'd stolen a wisp of a woodman's essence to produce children—twins. Beings not quite mortal and not quite fae. Grainne had committed a Black Act—a crime that could lead to a wise woman's lifetime exile from the Guild and clan lands. Some were sent to the exiles' camps, in the barren southern wastelands, to live out what was purported to be a miserable existence indeed.

Within the Dalthwein region, mortals and fae were allowed to take vows of bonding, even lifetime bonds. However, the one thing a mortal gave up when they chose to take a vow of lifetime bonding with one of the wood people was the right to have a child with their fae lover. The wood people didn't reproduce in the same manner as the Dalthweins did, and it seemed this difference in reproduction caused problematic conception for a human who attempted mating with a fae. Few mortal women who had tried it lived through the pregnancy.

The wood peoples' method of maintaining populations of their varied kinds was complex, intricate, and little known or understood by mortals. One thing was well known and documented among the Dalthwein and wood people, though. A halfling—an offspring of mixed mortal and fae essence—didn't adjust to its existence well. Problems for a child born of this fae and mortal mixture were frequent and far ranging, from severe mental and emotional illnesses to a wide berth of biological impairments that could occur. Some halflings could maintain a fairly normal

life under calm and controlled conditions it was said, but this was a rarely documented occurrence.

Grainne had stolen a slip of some woodman's essence long ago and bore him twin babes. She and Anna were of halfling blood. They were the living embodiment of a Black Act.

Before and after the creation of the wise women's guild, it was common knowledge and teaching that, while a mortal woman could learn the complex magics and chants necessary to steal a slip of a fae's essence, and the additional magics it took to seed her womb with said essence, Dalthwein women who did not carry the witch blood in their veins had a harder time successfully conceiving or birthing a halfling child. One of the reasons the witch women were respected by the wood people, and honored as advisors and shamans among the Dalthwein clans, was due to the fact a Dalthwein witch's energy vibrated on a level much closer to that of the wood folk's energy signature. They were closer in origins to the fae than most humans were.

Claire's soft, indoor shoes were pitiful protection against the deep snow. Her stockings were soaked through to her feet, which were raw from the biting cold. Exhausted and numb all over from walking in the intense blizzard, she struggled to stumble deeper into the border of the northeast forest. Beneath the snow-covered fronds of a tall pine, she collapsed. Leaning against the rough trunk, she lowered herself to the snow-brushed ground beneath the tree.

Just a short rest. Claire closed her eyes and fell asleep quickly as the wind changed direction and the snow drifted in under her shelter, covering her in a skiff of soft, icy crystals.

This serial fantasy novel will be continued in:

The Black Act Book 2: Witch Twins Secrets

For more info on The Black Act and other books by Louise Bohmer visit:

<http://www.louisebohmer.com>

About the Author

Louise Bohmer has over eight years experience in editing and publishing. She is an associate editor with KHP Publishers Inc., edits for Permuted Press, and has edited for many publishers and authors in a variety of genres including general interest, romance, erotica, mystery, horror, and speculative. Her writing experience extends across fiction, ghost writing, ad copy, web content, SEO copy, and press releases. Her latest release is the Anti-Heroes serial written with K.H. Koehler (Anti-Heroes Press) and you can read her short fiction in Detritus (Omnium Gatherum), The Red Penny Papers, and Old School. Plus her debut novel, The Black Act, is now available once again in serial form. She offers freelance services in editing, book cover design, ghost writing, and ebook formatting with her partner K.H. Koehler via The Job Octopus. She loves to hear from her readers via email and reviews. Her home base is New Brunswick, Canada, where she lives with a tattooed giant. You can pay her a visit at <http://www.louisebohmer.com> or email her at blackfaery76@yahoo.ca

Try out more fiction from Louise Bohmer and her writing partner K.H. Koehler. Here's a peek at their serial young adult novel about superheroes and supervillains, **Anti-Heroes**. You can now grab **New Girl: Anti-Heroes Book 1** for free at Amazon, Smashwords, Kobo, and B&N. For more details on the Anti-Heroes, visit: <http://antiheroesbook.blogspot.com/>

New Girl

Anti-Heroes Book 1

By Louise Bohmer & K.H. Koehler

Serena Swanson knew the first day at a new school was apt to suck on a cosmic level, but she had no idea that someone would set the lunchroom on fire.

The problem had begun in first period Algebra, which was fitting somehow, seeing how nothing good had ever come out of Algebra. Being the new girl, she had picked a seat a little behind the exact middle of the class. That was important, she reasoned, since sitting in the front told the world that you were a suck-up who would be shooting her hand up in the air every three-point-five seconds and trying to win brownie points with the teacher, and sitting too far in the back just pegged you as a troublemaker.

Since this was her first day, she was hoping for blessed anonymity.

Of course, that didn't happen.

She was down in her seat for no more than three minutes before Mr. Washington singled her out. "Miss Swanson, would you like to stand up and tell the class a bit about yourself?"

In that moment, Serena decided that Sky City High had a *massive* mean streak running through it. "I'd rather not," she said as politely as possible. Several of the suck-ups in the front snickered at that, the troublemakers muttered solemnly among themselves in the back, and the ones in the middle—the fans of blessed anonymity like herself—pretended to look elsewhere. She had a feeling this was the beginning of trouble.

Serena wasn't necessarily afraid of trouble. But in a place like Sky City High, trouble took on a whole new meaning. Maybe if her mom hadn't died in that car crash six months ago, maybe if she'd had even one relative that Serena knew was still alive, she might have wound up in a place like Seattle, Portland or Minneapolis. She could have even been happy in a little, anonymous backwoods town in Nebraska or Iowa.

But no. Her mom's only friend Macy lived in Sky City, home of the nation's Superheroes, and Aunt Macy had been the only one to contact her after the funeral and offer her a place to stay. So, of course, Serena wound up in the one place she hated more than any other—the one place she neither wanted nor needed to be.

She knew even without asking that there were at least three Supers in the class—most of them the suck-ups down in the front. She could feel them as they gave off their own particular psychic vibrations. The blonde girl who looked like she worked out was their leader. That Serena knew instinctively, like the way she could guess when the phone was going to ring a few seconds before it did, or what the winning lottery numbers would be that night.

The sandy-haired boy sitting to her right was her unofficial right-hand-man, and were he not biting back a snigger at Serena's expense, she might have thought he was cute. She knew a few things about the brown-haired boy with the bright blond streaks sitting on the girl's left: he was rich, too cute for his own good, and very, very closeted.

“Miss Swanson...?”

Suppressing the need to run screaming from the room, Serena got to her feet and tried to ignore the blonde girl, who was rolling her eyes.

damn, she's brave

She scanned the faces of the Supers down in the front, wondering where the ambient, semi-sarcastic thought had come from, then realized the thought had originated from behind her, from the back of the class. She glanced over one shoulder, letting her internal radar guide her, and realized it had radiated from a boy at the back who was using a pocketknife to clean his fingernails.

He was a bit too tall and a bit too rangy, and his dark hair was a bit too shaggy, and his clothes a bit too scruffy and out of date, but the moment she looked at him, he looked up as if he had sensed her. He had beautiful eyes, she noted, a honey-brown so pale they looked amber. For one half second they looked sad and a little vulnerable, then she made the mistake of trying to probe his thoughts, and they darkened and turned angry and remote.

The shaggy, out-of-date boy lashed psychically out at her, as if sensing her mental invasion, and Serena nearly lurched on her feet. He didn't look like much, but she was suddenly convinced that he was a powerful magick-wielder, whether he knew it or not. Powerful...and very, very angry. She thought how that was usually the perfect cocktail for a very good Supervillain.

She immediately turned away from him and faced Mr. Washington. She said in a rush, "I've lived in all different places, but Sky City seems nice. Thank you." She probably sounded like an idiot, but the last thing she needed, or wanted, was any attention. She sat down as gracefully as possible and lowered her head while the girl down in front sniggered and elbowed her second-in-command.

After class let out, she could feel the Supers tracking her out the door. She kept her head down and hurried out into the hallway that was filling up with students rushing to their next class.

that old bitch Mrs. Hennessey gave me a D she wouldn't know a preposition if it bit her ass

where the hell's Jason probably doing that cheerleader in the girl's bathroom

shit if I don't get a fix soon I don't know what I'll do what time is it how long before

Serena squeezed her eyes shut and looked down at the photocopied map in her hand, trying to concentrate on where her English class was instead of letting the bombardment of hundreds of ambient high school thoughts filter into her brain. She'd been more upset than she'd thought in Algebra, and she realized that at some point she'd dropped her mental shields.

In the crush of students, a girl slammed into her shoulder. It was like hitting a brick wall. The impact knocked Serena halfway across the hall, and as she slammed into a bank of lockers, she secretly—mostly subconsciously—shifted the molecular structure of the metal just a little so it

felt more like bumping a mattress. The impact bounced her back into the middle of the hallway, but she stopped herself before she could crash into the blonde Super girl from Algebra.

The girl gave her a deadly look and said, quite loudly, "Freak."

The boy with the blond streaks flanking her on her left said to the sandy-haired boy on her right, "Hey, Harrison, you wanna hold my dick?"

Harrison snickered. "*I'd rather not,*" he said in clear imitation of her earlier. Both boys grinned at her before racing off toward the gymnasium.

The blonde girl continued to glare. *christ another geek there goes the neighborhood*

"Excuse me?" Serena said without thinking and stood up straighter as a wave of anger pulsed through her body.

The blonde girl looked momentarily surprised by her reaction. "What did you say, you little shrimp?"