After Starlight

“Where Mama doe?”

Those were the first words Damir said to me the morning after you left. The babies are still just a little too young to fully understand the responsibility you have. Well, at least, Damir is. And maybe Mina… though I think she’s always just a little more aware, given the connection between you two. Kiara, being just like you, knows whats going on. I imagine she might even already know what’s going to happen this year.

“She had to do her ritual, Damie. She’ll be back soon enough.” How can I explain it to him in a way he’d really understand? I just kiss the top of his head, getting him out of his bed and changed for the day.

Mina wakes up, looking out the window almost knowingly. When I greet her for the first time in the day, she just looks up at me. *“Mama go.”* Then she holds her rock up, the one you made for her that lets her talk to you. I held up the stone, feeling the little aether reservoir you put into it sitting empty. I close my hands around it, and charge it with my own aether, knowing soon enough that I’ll have to teach our Bean how to do this herself.

Eventually, the little ones won’t need me anymore.

Just like with Damir, I kiss Mina on her head, handing her back her stone. I get her changed, and she store the stone in the front pocket of her overalls, so it sits right in front of her heart. I think she thinks it means you’ll hear her heartbeat and know she’s listening for you.

Entering Kiara’s room, I don’t know whether to expect her, Diss, or the room to be empty. These little ones do have a habit of disappearing, especially when you leave. Fortunately, not today. In her little bed, Kiara is already awake. I think our princess knew you were leaving, since her experience last year, she knew today was coming. Was even ready in her baby form, just in case.

“Mama’s already gone for the ritual, sweetie. You didn’t have to go this time.” Kiara looked almost disappointed for a moment but smiles at me. *“It okie, Ma. I stay here an help.”* She lifted her arms, wanting up, and, like her siblings, I get her ready for her day.

The house was quiet, as it is every time you go. The triplets sat in their highchairs, eating their cereal, drinking their juice. I knocked on Novalynn’s door, letting her know breakfast was ready if she wanted to get up. It’s… crazy how it’s been almost a year since she joined our family. My biggest guilt, but also my greatest retribution. *“I’ll be out soon, Ma.”* She calls back, her voice groggy. I leave her be, knowing that teenagers do need their sleep, and with how helpful the girl is, she’s more than welcome to rest as much as she needs. She joins us at the table eventually, her own bowl of cereal ready, a pot of tea steeping on the counter.

“I still wish she could have brought me with her.” Novalynn mused between mouthfuls of cereal.

“I don’t even fully understand what happens during the rituals, kiddo. Gabriella is always slightly different when she comes back though. I remember her saying, the first time she had to go away, that part of the ritual means she dies, to guide the dead. Which means last year, this little one also died too.” I kiss Kiara’s head, the little girl grinning up at me, almost with knowing pride.

“We still don’t fully know what you are, Nova. Gabriella said that your aether is like Kiara’s; that that bracelet reacted to you like it does her. Whether than means you’re an Other, or a fragment of Kiki, or something else entirely, we don’t know. It also means we don’t know what might happen if you tried to join the ritual.”

Novalynn mused over it as she finished her cereal, getting a cup of tea before wandering up to the library.

“Leave the door open, we all like hearing you play that piano.”

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