Ophelia P.I.
Meeting Renee: A Prequel Vignette

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2024

Ophelia leaned over the polished table preparing the fresh batch of coriander she'd received that morning when the tinkling bell from the shop's door caught her ear. She straightened and wiped her hands on her apron, smoothing the long skirts of her dress in the process.

"Good afternoon," she greeted as she turned to meet her customer. "How may I help you?"

A tall man with a royal blue tailcoat and a powdered wig dabbed a thin sheen of sweat from his forehead. His right hand rested on the intricately carved handle of his walking stick. "Ms. Windsor, I presume?"

"As I live and breathe, good sir." Ophelia nodded and brushed a few strands of dark hair that had loosened from her tight bun away from her face. It was a dreadfully hot day; the only reprieve she'd dared were small whispers to the wind when customers left the shop. Just enough to cool her skin but not enough to draw the curiosity of visitors.

The man peered around the array of shelves and jars with bright green eyes. "Do you preside over this apothecary's operations by yourself?"

The question tickled her nerves, but she kept her expression carefully neutral. "Yes. Since its inception, I'm afraid."

He nodded curtly, glanced over his shoulder, then lowered his voice. "*Quem dues vultperdere, dementat prius*."

Ophelia froze with her hand beside her ear. She hadn't heard the words of the immortals since departing Europe three years past. "Excuse me." She lifted her skirts and marched around the stranger. Retrieving an iron key from her apron, she locked the door and readied a spell behind her lips. After so many confrontations with zealots waving the *Malleus Maleficarum* mere inches from her face, she'd found it difficult to trust even those within the circle. "How did you know?"

"Forgive me, Ms. Windsor. It was my wife who suspected you, though we are both immortal." He raised the tricorn hat from his head and bowed. "Robert Swan, at your service."

Ophelia worked her tongue behind her teeth, fighting to catch her breath. "Pardon my asking twice, Mr. Swan, but how is it I can help you?"

"My wife, Renee, is a High Sorceress. She wishes to meet you."

A dozen questions threatened her tongue. Renee Swan was not the leader of New York's circle; Ophelia had discovered as much during her tenure in the city. That position belonged to a High Sorceress named Esmerelda Forewerth, though she hadn't found the opportunity to meet. That narrowed the reasons for Renee to call on Ophelia.

Besides, Robert's candid attitude and easy admissions in an unsecured location unsettled her. A trap, perhaps? It would not be the first time Ophelia was lured into danger. "Might I ask why Mrs. Swan did not join you on this outing?"

"She is a very powerful woman, and her attendance would surely draw attention to you and your establishment. I speak her words when I say that this meeting is in your best interest, Ms. Windsor."

Ophelia's heart sped. As a witch, apprenticing beneath a High Sorceress was an honor and a necessity. Learning to more effectively commune with and control her affiliated element—wind, in Ophelia's case—paved the path to obtaining the title. However, it was a competitive position, and she recalled witches promising ends beyond their means to an available High Sorceress. Oftentimes, their fervor was noticed by the wrong people.

If Robert intended to turn Ophelia into the church, this was an insidious plot, indeed.

"When and where does Mrs. Swan wish to meet?" Ophelia asked, each word feeling heavier on her tongue as she spoke.

Robert grinned. "This evening, if it does not inconvenience you." He slid a small piece of parchment free from his coat pocket and replaced his handkerchief. "Here is the address. She will be most pleased, Ms. Windsor."

"I hope to express the same, Mr. Swan." Ophelia accepted the paper and tucked it beneath a bottle on her working table. "I will stop by after I've finished for the day."

"Very good. We will await your visit." With another sweeping bow, Robert lifted his cane and turned toward the door.

"Oh. Pardon me, let me unlock that for you." Ophelia stepped forward just as Robert held up his hand.

"Don't trouble yourself, my dear. *Div donuum.*" Robert flicked his wrist. The lock clicked, and the door swung forward. "Good day to you, Ms. Windsor." With another smile, he departed through the open door.

"That bodes well," Ophelia murmured, summoning a short burst of wind to close the door. She hesitated, then willed the breeze to caress her face and neck. It wouldn't do her any good to appear at the feet of a High Sorceress soaked with sweat.

She returned to her coriander, and her thoughts wandered as she assembled packets of tea, measurements for tonics, and powders for pastes. The sun was low on the horizon when she

finished the last of her work, and she fetched her coat from the small, single storage room in the corner. Despite the warm afternoons, the evenings took on an uncomfortable chill that accompanied the salty air of the nearby sea.

Holding the addressed parchment close to her chest, Ophelia locked the door of her apothecary and inhaled a deep breath. She had escaped greater perils than this. There were still places to go if the worst came to pass.

She straightened her shoulders and made her way down the cobblestone streets, the heels of her boots clicking with each step. It was the time of evening when men shuffled to taverns and ale houses for their last drink while the women tended their children and prepared dinner. Many shifts and changes had come upon New York since 1600, and Ophelia preferred to keep to herself among the hustle and bustle. There were whispers of rebellion in the air, but whether they were threats or promises was another matter.

The Swans' estate rose above the others on Heere Street, a stunning brick building with crow-stepped gables and red tile roofs. It stood two stories high, with lush gardens in the small yard and a paved path with ivory stepping stones. Ophelia's small wood cabin on Broad Street, nestled tightly between many copies of the same, paled in comparison.

Ophelia knocked on the door and was greeted by a bright young woman with a warm smile and yellow hair. She wore a freshly pressed white petticoat beneath a taupe bodice and red skirts.

"You must be Ms. Windsor." She curtsied and stood aside. "Allow me to show you to the drawing room."

There was a pull to her words as if each one struck a different chord in Ophelia's heart. She felt a strong compulsion to agree before a word could leave her lips.

A siren? Ophelia wondered as she swallowed her too-ready assent. "You were expecting me?"

"Oh, yes. Mrs. Swan wishes for all of her friends and visitors to feel welcome, Ms. Windsor." She giggled and lowered her voice. "Especially folk like us."

It seemed her assumption was correct. "I see. Might you have a name?"

"Emily, ma'am. Emily Alton."

"Very good, Ms. Alton. After you." Ophelia stepped through the threshold and gestured for Emily to take the lead.

The Swans' home was just as opulent on the inside as it appeared on the outside. Oil paintings decorated the walls between metal sconces. Crests and symbols of forgotten lineages were painted

and embroidered into fine tapestries hung from the ceiling and over the tall doorways. Lavish carpets stretched beneath expensive furniture—a daring choice, Ophelia thought, considering the heavy mud that gathered on every path that wasn't paved with cobblestone.

The drawing room was more of the same, with plush sofas near a large, crackling hearth and a mahogany table in between them was set with sparkling wine glasses and a tray of hors d'oeuvres. Robert stood to greet Ophelia, and the woman beside him followed suit.

Renee carried herself like a queen. Her long, auburn hair was fashionably curled at her shoulders, and her sapphire eyes were enhanced by the barest touches of coal. Ruby lips broke into a smile that could bring shame to the sun.

Ophelia could feel the very air rippling with Renee's magic. Hers was an ancient power that commanded immediate respect. It left Ophelia breathless.

Renee clasped her hands at the cinched waist of her emerald dress and curtsied. "Ms. Windsor. It is a pleasure to meet your acquaintance."

"Likewise, Mrs. Swan." Ophelia held her skirts and dipped in a curtsy, but the movement felt awkward compared to the noble grace that Renee seemed to move with so easily.

Robert chuckled. He'd discarded his wig in favor of his light hair that he'd pulled back into a handsome tail at the nape of his neck. "I fear I was too late for introductions."

Renee kissed his cheek, then gestured to the sofas. "Please. Have a seat." She waited until Ophelia was comfortable to effortlessly sink next to Robert. "I believe we have long reached the hour when it is acceptable to enjoy something stronger than tea." She waved her hand in the air.

Emily appeared at the end of the table, bowed, then lifted the decanter of wine and filled their glasses. She vanished as quickly as she'd come, leaving the three of them alone.

Ophelia licked her lips and lifted her glass. "My apologies for being blunt; however, I must know. Is Ms. Alton a siren?"

"How wonderfully perceptive of you, Ms. Windsor. Yes. Emily is a siren." Renee took a sip of her wine and then giggled. "Please forgive me. I have been so very looking forward to meeting you."

"I find myself puzzled as to why," Ophelia admitted, then enjoyed a tiny sip of her wine. It was warm and rich, a varietal she supposed hailed from France.

“Robert and I have resided here for many years, encountering many immortals. However, you are the first witch to find her way to the colonies.” Renee set her glass on the table and fixed her gaze on Ophelia’s face. “Are you yet under the tutelage of a High Sorceress?”

Ophelia’s breath caught in her throat. It couldn’t possibly be this easy. “No.”

“What a fortuitous day!” Renee brought her clasped hands to her chest. “I have yearned for an apprentice for so long. I feared Esmerelda would lay claim to you first.”

Ophelia blinked, then cleared her throat. “I arrived in New York three years past, Mrs. Swan. Why wait to call upon me until now?”

Renee’s smile faltered, and the warmth disappeared from her eyes. Just the change in her expression caused Ophelia to regret her inquiry.

“You were followed to New York, Ms. Windsor,” Robert said carefully.

“I… I beg your pardon?” Ophelia’s fingers and toes lost feeling, and a trickle of ice danced across the length of her spine.

“Two men tasked with ensuring your demise arrived three days after you did,” Renee replied.

The image of flaming torches and the sounds of screams flooded Ophelia’s mind. Calls to burn the witch. Buckets of holy water poured over her home and her person. She had fled from it—raced for the first boat to the colonies to start a new life. To think she was followed…

“Ophelia, they are unable to hurt you any longer,” Renee murmured gently. “However, for the safety of all immortals in New York and to the circle in which they belong, we had to make absolutely certain that no one else would come for you.”

“We?”

Renee nodded. “Yes. Esmerelda, Robert, and I.”

Ophelia adjusted uncomfortably in her seat. “What happened to the men?”

“I invited them for tea,” Renee said, her smile returning. “Oh, goodness, I’ve frightened you. That was not my intention. You are safe, I assure you.”

“What happened to the men?” Ophelia asked again, punctuating her words. Murder was intolerable from either side. If Mrs. Swan believed that taking lives was the best way to maintain the safety of the immortals, there was nothing more for them to discuss.

Robert chuckled. “I must admit, they were lovely chaps once they forgot about you, Ms. Windsor.”

“Forgot me?” Ophelia felt like an echo within their conversation. She pushed down the blush rising to her cheeks.

“I simply erased their memories,” Renee said. “Without them, they forged new lives for themselves in the colonies.”

Ophelia’s eyes widened. *What a terrifying power.* It was difficult to decide if what Renee had done was worse. But what was the alternative? Turn them in to the authorities for crimes not yet committed? Reveal Ophelia’s presence in doing so? “Can they truly be happy this way?”

“Yes. In fact, they are frequent visitors of your apothecary, Ophelia. You’ve crafted elixirs for their children, Abe and Maria,” Robert said.

“For their fevers,” Ophelia muttered. Thomas and John both had cheerful dispositions and always paid her well over what she asked. Not once had her being a witch been mentioned, and their wives had come to her while pregnant to help ease their aches and pains.

Renee smoothed her dress and reached for her glass of wine. “My wish is for immortals and humans to live together in harmony. I understand this goal to be lofty, but there is never a reason to harm one another.”

Ophelia nodded. More questions swirled inside of her glass while she studied the deep red wine.

“‘Lofty,’ you say. You mean impossible,” Robert teased.

“Silly fopdoodle. ‘Lofty’ is what I said, and ‘lofty’ is what I meant,” Renee countered, poking Robert’s shoulder.

Ophelia fished her next question from the depths of her wine. “Mrs. Swan—”

“Renee, please.”

Ophelia flinched. To call a High Sorceress by her first name seemed blasphemous. There was a power in all names—especially immortals. “…Renee,” she said slowly, trying not to wince. “Which element do you hold an affinity with?”

“Ah! Yes! Ice.” Renee beamed. She held up one hand with her palm flat, and a hundred tiny snowflakes swirled in a sparkling whirlwind between her fingers.

Frozen memories. It made perfect sense when Ophelia considered it. “I see. Mine is wind.”

The snowstorm vanished, and Renee’s expression turned serious. “Ophelia, if you do not wish to apprentice beneath me, I understand. Truly.”

Ophelia shook her head. “No, that isn’t why I asked. I would love nothing more than to be your apprentice.”

“Then what consumes your thoughts, darling?”

“What if there are more who followed me? What if I’ve put you both in danger?” Ophelia relented. “I cannot help but fear the worst.”

“They would not have escaped the notice of two High Sorceresses and a wizard.” Robert wagged a finger in the air. “We’ve kept a close eye on you and your apothecary.”

Renee placed a hand on her husband’s shoulder. “There will always be those who seek to see our end, Ophelia. In dear Robert’s words, it is impossible to escape the eyes of humans forever. Even so, I assure you, you have not put us in any more danger than we were two hours past.”

“We were in much deeper waters, then. Emily made another attempt to sing herself to higher wages,” Robert grumbled.

“And she succeeded, I believe.” Renee laughed. “So, my dear Ophelia, what will it be?”

Ophelia twirled the stem of her glass between two fingers. An apprentice. The word tasted sweet on her tongue. No longer would she have to brave New York alone. Then again, with the circle watching her, had she ever? She raised her glass to Renee. “I accept your offer. Please allow me to be your apprentice.”

Renee tapped her glass to Ophelia’s. A blue glow surrounded their outlines on contact, and a soft breeze carried a handful of errant snowflakes into their wine. The elements had accepted their accord.

“My goodness, that is quite the encouragement. Wind typically requires far more coaxing for it to behave,” Renee marveled.

“A smart match.” Robert nodded and stood. “Now, I believe it is high time we enjoyed dinner. Ophelia, will you join us?”

Ophelia withdrew her glass and smiled. “Of course, Robert. Thank you.”

As Emily and their cook filled the dining table with meats and sides, Ophelia enjoyed laughing and talking in perfect companionship.

Theirs was a friendship that would thrive for a millennium.

Thank you for Reading!

Check out Ophelia's first novel on Amazon at amzn.to/3TrNBHc.

Description

Travel back in time to 1950s Illinois in Ophelia's cozy, magical, and mysterious debut. Fans of the *Eastwind Witches* and *Dresden Files* won't want to miss this book!

Ophelia Windsor's life as a private eye in Cicero is smooth enough. Find a missing wife here, catch an unfaithful, two-bit Johnny there, the usual. It's the perfect cover-up for a witch.That is until John Salazar comes knocking after hours with news of a murder and evidence that the victim was a fellow Immortal. The more Ophelia uncovers, the more she realizes that James O'Connor's death was no accident. It's a race against time to preserve Illinois' best-kept secret.The Immortals are no longer safe in Cicero.

If you've already read the first book in the main series of Ophelia P.I., you may continue with the short story: amzn.to/3KxaaVm

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