Beautiful Bulleteer ~~Presents~~ Prereleases:

Foolish Fortune Teller Lucile Rogers

Book (1,1,1)

What am I reading?

This is Book (1, 1, 1) of the Beautiful Bulleteer book series.

The coordinates are in the order of (publication release, book-line, installment). That means this is the (First book to be released, covering the first major story line, the first installment therein). If and when this book gets a sequel it will be numbered as (x, 1, 2).

A Brief Introduction of Time and Place

Jesus Christ was born into world of the virgin Mary, and later the calendar would mark that fateful year as 1 Anno Domini. Rome was sacked in 512 ad. The Black Death swept over Europe for the first time in 1709 and plunged civilization into the 87 year period known as the Black Century. From that darkness emerged those that would stand against annihilation, the church found their saints and the witches found each other. In 1932 Pope Innocent VIII denounced witchcraft. Christopher Columbus discovered the new world in 1940. The musician Prince released the album "2549" in 2532, there was a fascination about the year 2550 around that period, although cultural historians don't agree as to why. 2588 saw the Day the Computers Screamed and the world went dark. Limited television broadcasting was reintroduced to the public in 2673. Most people have not made an effort to purchase a television, many in the remote towns of America haven't seen one in person.

Americans seldom hear of the old world. The country's international concerns are focused on its neighbors: Canada, New England, The Navajo Federation, Mexico, the flotilla refugee nation of Nishun, and unfortunately the Apacheria. As well as the region of the Caribbean, but the safety of shipping lanes is a tightly regulated thing, only the occasional sailor or ambassador has stepped foot in those lands in a long time. Tensions in regard to terrorist activity in South America and how in may affect American supply lines are again on the rise, as reported by officials of the confederal government.

Truckers, who along with the railroads are the life blood of American commerce in the west, must take safety very seriously. No trucker should ever exit their vehicle alone on the roadside. Thankfully after the reintroduction of the radio, the GLO coordinated with highway and state patrols to provide assistance in such cases. Unfortunately, patience is a virtue and disappearances still happen. Civilians may only travel when the road is open and must be logged for safety. They are advised to never travel alone. Hitchhiking is illegal, the occasional tragedy in the news reminds people why.

Ill Fates in Atomic Springs

Info

This story takes place in small town in Idaho, in the Spring of 2678 ad.

Wand Page

"And you, my dear, are you also interested in love? Come, sit down, and tell Madam Delphina what questions you have of fate!"

Lucile D. Rogers shuffled her deck of tarot cards as the high school girls shuffled the last of their company onto the stool across from her. "Alright my dear, place your hand upon the deck and speak your question." Lucile, enthusiastically performing as Madam Delphina, splayed the cards across the table. The girl asked if a certain boy would take her to prom. "A dangerous question! Are you sure? What is his name and why him specifically?" The fortune teller asked the questions delicately, gathering the feelings needed to track down an answer.

The girl blushed and had to push through her friends' giggling. "He's been talking to me a lot lately, and last year nobody asked me and I'm a senior- it's not that I like him, but I really want-" She was fighting herself to answer, not daring to look at her friends. She never said his name; maybe that was deliberate.

Lucile deftly shuffled and dealt out three cards, and with no hesitation or further analysis she scooped them up again. The answer was a firm no but it felt confused, and she had an inkling as to why, so she took it upon herself to adjust the question.

"Oh no!" The fortune teller gasped, slowly looking at the girl and the group all fell silent at this dramatic turn. Again she dealt the cards and this time announced them aloud, "Ace of Wands, Knight of Swords, Queen of Swords -reversed."

Then she began to gently read them. It was her simplest configuration, a three point cross. She moved her hand over the line, fingers twisting in the wiɳd, sliding over not just the symbols printed on cardstock, but esoteric things beyond sight. From it she glimpsed the texture of howlite undulations apart from all time and space.

The fortune teller grinned. "Just kidding." The girls all exhaled in relief. "You will be asked to go to prom, but who might be a surprise. It won't be a bad thing, it'll be a chance at something new. Don't let embarrassment or fear stop you. Regardless, the choice is yours."

The girl and her friends seemed pleased and took their leave. Lucile began casually shuffling her deck again, while peaking at untouched tip jar. She hadn't expected anything from high-schoolers anyways. With a sigh she watched them go, knowing full well what was in store for that final girl. She would be asked to prom, but would have no date in the end, for the sake of her friends' approval she will turn the boy down. If she felt lonely it would be her own fault for not taking the opportunity.

Fate was a fluid thing made of decisions and the twisting between them. However, using a fortune to change fate was dangerous business; Fate does not like being cheated. Moreover, Lucile just couldn't bear to break the girl's heart. So, she sugarcoated it, and with a little preparation maybe the girl could make a change, but people seldom choose the hard changes.

The fortune teller knew that well.

Lucile's habits were well worn, her hands moved quickly as she peered all around the town square. She'd stationed herself out in the open, as visible as possible. She tried to spot her next client but not appear desperate

or pressuring, just a casual glance and a friendly smile, ever ready to say hello to anyone walking by, busying herself with the shuffling and the forecast.

Of course, customers were not the only reason she stayed in the open. She practiced her magic both secretly and publicly as an appeal to the Steward. She had politely announced herself upon entering the domain of Fort Ross Idaho but had yet to receive a response. She had been waiting all day to ask permission but really couldn't pass up on possible customers.

A voice occurred in her ear. "Leave."

"What," said Lucile, quietly to avoid notice from the people around her. "I promise I won't cause trouble. I'll stay for a couple days, tell of fortune, make some cash. Please."

She waited for a response and then felt the gaze of a witch. They greeted one another with a mage's handshake, a simple exchange looks, undetected by anyone else around them, each of their eyes lit with secret flame. The witch's gaze was stronger, as if bore holes through her. Lucile stood from her little table and prepared a friendly smile, although she grew nervous. "Hello, I'm-" but she was cut off.

"I am Cloe Bonerunner, second apprentice to Steward Corrina Bonerunner. She's busy and doesn't want to be distracted by an outsider doing magic in the park." The witch wore a cold expression, unyielding to the point of seeming disgusted, adorned with long coarse black hair braided with bone charms of a tradition Lucile did not know.

Lucile froze, unready to accept, but unable to say anything else. She knew how this would end, she ought to, she was a fortune teller.

The second apprentice pulled out some cash and ungraciously tossed it into the tip jar. "She says you can have this. Get on the first bus you can and don't make me come out here again.

A bill spilled over the rim and fell onto the side walk, nearly being taken away by the wind. Lucile bent to snag it, before silently cursing herself as the witch walked away. She packed up her table and chairs onto the dolly and stopped by the bus station to get a ticket. She chose the earliest ride heading east, to a tiny town about a half hour away. After wrestling her cart through the motel room door, she had nothing to do but sulk and wait for the morning.

Another trip, another town, another bag of chips and tough jerky. Boarding seemed longer than the actual drive. Soon enough she looked up from her book and saw the town come into view. Soon she felt person wash over her skin and the wiɳd thickened around her; even expecting it, the domain made her skin break into goose bumps. Lucile cupped her hands and focused, coalescing a simple introduction and releasing it into the domain, so that she would not offend the local steward Another town, another chance to work her magic, another encounter of supervision and suspicion.

She arrived in Atomic Springs.

Knight in Rings

He woke up in a queen-sized bed, the other half was undisturbed. He washed his face and dried it on a sloppily hanged blue towel. The green towel was neatly folded. He quickly combed his short hair, then left the comb next to the hair dryer. On the pantry's top shelf there was an ample supply of granola, he reached for the last of his bread to make toast. On the counter was a multi-level fruit rack, the apple dish was empty. He took from the bananas. After breakfast he left to work.

Billie Bowling drove out to the orchard through the center of Atomic Springs. His work bag was next to him in the center seat, bumping his arm. The passenger seat was empty. There was always a little more work that could be done at Law's Orchard. This year they were short on man power. He took it upon himself to handle the fertilizing, shimmy-slathing manure around the tree bases, while the chickens gawked and bawked nearby. As he made his way back to get another load, he noticed some sickly leaves.

Sean, a coworker who had been tending to the bees, was startled as Billie slammed the shovel up against the shed. "Hey man, what's wrong?"

Billie growled as he hunted for supplies, "the trees just rife, covered in aphids!"

Sean couldn't really muster a meaningful response, only ease, "I guess we missed one."

"Of course we did. Nobody else cares." He winced momentarily before stomping back out.

Near the end of the day Mr. Law came around, "Billie, stop by the house when you finish up."

From the mudroom he entered and took a seat at the kitchen table, as he had many times before. His eyes wandered into the living room and caught on the picture of a young woman in resplendent white dress, standing beside himself in a cheap rented tuxedo. He looked away.

Soon the older couple came in to meet him.

"Hello, Mrs. Law."

"Billie! You haven't called me that in years," she said.

He apologized for no particular reason. The three of them sat at the four-person table.

Mr. Law started to speak with a sense of delicate, awkward gravity, "son, we were talking, and, we don't want you to leave, but we wouldn't hold it against you if you did."

"What," said Billie, unprepared for the topic.

Mrs. Law leaned in, "we don't want you to feel like you have to stay to work the crop, if you wanted to go back to the city, we'd be able to get by."

"That's right, my leg ain't that bad yet."

They looked at him expectantly, for anything, any response at all.

He stared at his feet while he stood, "well, I'm not going anywhere while there's work to do," he said with a curt smile.

"Okay. Why don't you stay for dinner, hon?" Mrs. Law spoke with smothering affection.

"Thanks, but I've got some leftovers at home to get through."

Mr. Law followed Billie out to truck. After some general small talk about the orchard, he asked, "you sure you don't want to stay? It would make her feel better if you ate with us every now and then."

"I'll think about it."

"Think about it faster. You're not the only one hurting."

Billie drove away from Law's Apples, where he'd worked since high school. He drove past the road towards the church where he'd been married. He drove past the turn to his house, and the lonesome road that led to the cemetery on the hill. He drove to the bar near the end of town.

That night, or rather early the next morning, he stood alone, trying to find the strength to undress and go to bed. In dark he could almost feel her nearby, no light to prove otherwise. "God, I miss you."

Queen the Sword

"How long has it been,"

"How long since what?"

"Since he died,"

"Just after my 4th year with you, so 17 years."

"That's right. Good, he didn't see me like this."

In the sparse shafts of light sneaking through the leaves, Dorothy sits at the base of the tree, tenderly stroking the hand of her mother, whose skin is pale as maggots. Shadowed apples throb gentle neon waves across courtyard secluded from the rest of the world. From the mother's groin stands the trunk of the tree, the flesh of her thighs intermingled with base, her legs lost within the twisting roots. Her veins are green as its leaves, and its leaves beat with her pulse. Its bark is her night gown, stiffly growing down her sides mixing into the soil. Worn pillows and blankets comfort what little of her back was still accessible.

"Don't say that. I'm sure he still loves you," said Dorothy, replying but pained by the feeling that they weren't having a conversation at all.

The mother's gray eyes pointed into nothing. "How did they do it?"

"Who?"

"The immortals, the greats- This tree, I was supposed to do great things. Was it worth it?"

"Of course it was. Your own little coven, your own little town. Everyone has a place thanks to you."

"It was a distraction."

"You did what you had to, and your work is a massive achievement."

"But it's almost over now," the woman's glassy eyes searched for clarity, and out of that fog the suddenly burned to life in bright ripe red. Ruby Everseed, Steward of Atomic Springs, had returned. She gazed at her apprentice. "You won't let it go to waste, will you?"

"I will cherish all of it," said Dorothy Everseed, Heir Apprentice.

"Have you been getting along with the girls?"

"More or less."

"I hear what they say about me. You have to take care of them. The younger needs motivation. The domain, the town, my duties, you'll inherit both, but can you continue my work?"

"I will. I'll do whatever it takes and find help when I cannot."

"Well then." Ruby tried to adjust herself, but her movement was so wooden that she settled back unsatisfied. "I want to give you a final test, not that we have a choice. There's a soµnd lurking about, something vile and strong. It- slipped inside while I was weak, now it's evading me somehow. I feel traces of it, in the neighborhood, at the store, out near the farms."

Dororthy finished with no concern and full understanding, "and I will catch and graft it. A strong addition for your Tree of Murmurs."

Ruby smiled.

"Do you have any other hints for me?"

"Be careful."

"Consider it done."

"Also," Ruby instructed, "we have a visitor in town."

From the soil and grass onto the vinyl floor of the kitchen, Dorothy slid shut the door of the courtyard behind her. It was hidden behind the three sections of their home pressed against the hillside, just big enough to comfortably fit a tree. The home was a patchwork that had grown gradually. Ruby and Joshua first lived in a camper that had now been covered and connected to a manufactured unit, and then a set of not quite finished

bedrooms built in wood framing and drywall. Joshua's fingerprints of ingenuity and inexperience were all over. He a good father for the brief time she knew him.

Dorothy herself contributed a walkway of pavers that were now sinking into the jaws of dandelions. She didn't need to know how to make something perfect in order to make it good enough. It was Joshua's latest and last project, she finished it while Ruby mourned.

"We do what we must," she said while pulling at the beads around her neck. Out from under her shirt she laid out her large wooden crucifix necklace. She drove off with a task and a mission.

Sitting outside the town's visitor center was woman reading over the history signboards. A sight that no one else would notice, but Dorothy could see the stranger's hands were ablaze with enchanting breαth, gingerly shuffling a deck of cards. The outsider dressed plainly, no uniform or insignia, nor did she maintain the full body breαth of a proper witch. Dorothy parked and approached, the woman perked up and looked around, until they locked eyes in a mage's handshake.

"I'm Lucile, traveling fortune teller," she said politely, stowing away her cards in a box attached to her belt.

"I'm Dorothy, first apprentice. Which coven are you with?" The witch towered over her, spoke curtly, and eyed her up and down already suspicious because both of them knew witches wore black. Lucile was not.

"None."

"Outcast?"

Lucile hesitated, before resuming a polite smile. "I left on my own. I'd prefer to be called a freelancer."

"Telling fortunes? Do I need to worry about you swindling people?"

"No no, I just enjoy doing it. I don't charge, I get by on tips, and sometimes poker."

"Gambling as a magician? That would be swindling."

"Just a joke!" There was a moment of silence. To the witch this was an interview, but the traveler tried to make it a conversation, "first apprentice, huh? So, your master has you out here handling the all chores?"

"Yes and I'm happy to." Dorothy waved to the signboard, "she built this town from nothing. It's full of hard-working people that made it their home. I love this town. What do you enjoy about your work?"

"It's what I'm good at, sometimes I can help people, give them the best warning I can."

"hmm. How long will you be here?"

"A few days, when my novelty wears off, and the clients dry up."

"It's a shame you didn't come in the winter when the hot spring's busy, or the summer for the performances. We'd have more tourists."

"Maybe I could swing back through sometime."

"Sure. Mind yourself and welcome to Atomic Springs."

"Thank you."

Dorothy extended a hand, maybe as a formal welcome, perhaps as a final seal. They shook. "Do me a favor, Lucile, keep an eye out for an unusual soμnd. It's likely dangerous and I have plans for it. Signal or call this number if you see anything."

"Do you want a reading? I could help you find it that way."

"That's alight, I'm sure you need to find paying customers." She turned to walk away, and in a split second before her eyes looked elsewhere, she caught the fortune teller's expression turning sour. It likely meant nothing.

Dorothy pondered her mission as she drove. She saw the soaring groωls above the treetops, and the lurid mδan that skulked in the alley way, and the many whispεrs on the wiɳd that filled the world. Not so long ago Ruby could have taken care of a malignant soμnd with ease but with the current state of her health the domain

was beginning to seem like a suggestion than anything else. The cautious thing to do would be to integrate into the domain now, before it's too late. Maybe she was waiting for Ruby's approval, perhaps she wasn't ready to face how close to death Ruby really was. She had been preparing for it, she could have drove back and asked Ruby that moment. Then she could solve this problem ease. There was also the issue of what danger this mysterious soμnd might pose to the people, but if Ruby was willing to use it as a test, then it mustn't be that bad.

Dorothy spent the day doing chores and wracking her brain. Best to get everything else out of the way, she was the only one that could after all.

The girls returned from school as Dorothy prepared to head out. Becky, the elder, was shocked, "You said we would work on my spell casting today."

"I know, but something important has come up. Ruby is having me graft a special fruit," Dorothy explained.

"You said I'd do the next one." Becky stared at her.

Dorothy didn't respond.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No, no not at all." She was taken aback, there was a hint of fear in the girl's voice. "Do you need any help with your homework?"

"No, I can do it," Becky insisted and dragged Donna along with her.

Dorothy ran some errands and lastly went out to the border of the town, where a line was strung along fence posts and the occasional bush or rock, encircling the town. Such lines were a common tradition, many people would tie ribbons and mementos to them. Witches used them for their own traditions. She intended to take some on the enchanted wind chimes and repurpose them for her search. If Ruby's lucidity couldn't be counted on to locate the target, then this would at least help as Dorothy formulated a spell.

She set the chimes in the seat of her jeep, and the clock suddenly reminded her of her prior plans. She rushed to the church and poured through the backdoor to the kitchen, "sorry I'm-"

"Late by 2 minutes, how could you," said Sherry. "The old woman running you ragged?"

"Yeah, busy day."

They meandered through the church, cleaning up after various community functions. They also had to lay out all their decorations for Easter this coming Sunday, but more importantly they had to gossip. It was a vital task for the management of the community's morale, and there was much to discuss.

"Did you know! Did. You. Know. Did you hear the news," Sherry asked.

"No, what," said Dorothy, tense with anticipation.

"Little Lizzy, the Crawford's girl, is. Pregnant."

"Oh my- she didn't graduate did she-"

"Exactly."

"Who's the father!?"

"Exactly!"

"What is she going to do, I'm sure we could find work for her, but raising a kid on her own? Her parents have the dinner to worry about and-"

"I know, I know. I thought the same thing when I heard it from Janet, but she heard it from John, who, of course, didn't ask any follow up questions."

"Typical."

"Typical. I'm going to make a trip to get some quilt supplies, regardless."

"Count me in, we need to look after each other," said Dorothy.

Soon they finished filling all the plastic Easter eggs, their last chore for the night. Most of their conversation was done too.

"Has anything else been happening," asked Sherry.

"I know what hasn't," said Dorothy solemnly. "Billie still hasn't come to a service."

"Oh and that scowl he has."

"It would be good for him, everyone's worried."

They sat quietly for a moment. The little table pressed against the wall had three chairs, and now only two of them were filled. They still got all their work done, but these past three months were still painfully difficult.

"We should give him time," said Sherry, "he'll come when he's ready."

"I know," said Dorothy, "but we all miss her too."

"Marianne was going to whip him into cleaning out the grill for us."

"I forgot about that. That's another headache I might need to handle."

Introducing Dorothy Everseed

Legal name: Dorothy Leeanne Marsh. 5'9", 175lbs, age 29, long black hair loosely bound, peach skin, emerald eyes, and well endowed. Never seen in public without her crucifix pendant and a focused expression, which will quickly melt into a warm smile if you get her attention.

Private thoughts from Ruby Everseed -

"She's the archetypal witch in appearance, although she dresses too modestly, it hinders her breαth. She fulfills her duties with pragmatic competence. I shouldn't feel so disappointed, but I needed an apprentice that could make full use of my tree. I supposed she did, just not to excel in spell craft. When I got her she was crippled with Sternwraith Syndrome, the taught her the worδs needed to manage the spastic trembling of those phantom limbs. I should give her credit for maintaining that focus. When I tried to feed her more, we found the limits of the body's tolerance for my murmur fruit. I wiped the vomit from her chin thinking of all the decades I spent guarding this town alone, working every hour of the day to make head way on my design, now watching as my first student failed to make use of it. It's the feeling of god laughing at you.

At least it was good from her. She was born in the coven and had an adequate education. Her condition is a disappointment, very much so for her parents. Dorothy has never said anything about that situation, the mementomancer did a good job. However, during those first years with her, sometimes she'd give Joshua and me pause, certain horrifying ideas she'd gotten into her head about the role of parents, a mother in particular. I can speculate well enough what her childhood was like, I've seen plenty like it. My new aspirant may have been disabled, but my new daughter had spirit at least. I can trust she'll take care of the people when I'm gone. If I had any real complaints, it would be that she spends too much time at church. I don't expect her to spend every moment working, but the legacy of our coven still needs tending."

King of Cups

Billie walked up the main road beyond the shops to the bar, when he came across something odd. Some kind of street performer he didn't recognize was set up on the bar's adjoining grass patch. She was talking to a local, shuffling cards and acting flamboyant.

The local, a middle-aged woman Billie recognized from the grocery store, said "that's all it is really, I can't keep living like this."

"Then allow the cards to advise you," said the fortune teller, who laid out cards in some silly ritual, then finally concluded, "You've been focusing on what comes easy, but you're not happy with where it's lead you. You'll find someone that offers you a chance to change, but it won't be pleasant. Try giving it a second chance if you want to see a new horizon."

The fortune teller finished with some pleasantries and began passively shuffling. Billie watched her eyes dart back and forth between the woman and the jar. No tip was given. He caught the briefest tick on the fortune teller's brow, she glanced his way and invited him over with a smile.

"Would you like a reading? Let Madam Delphina show you what fate has in store!"

"No thanks, I'm good," he said looking her over, she seemed disappointed. A cold breeze urged him onwards, as he shivered in his jacket, he noticed she only wore thin shawl for covering. He nodded towards the building, "but I'll buy you a drink if you want it."

"Buy a girl a drink? Maybe. How about a love reading then," she said with a grin.

His face soured, "no."

As he walked away, she called after him, "I don't charge. We could do both!"

But he was gone, disappearing into the building with a burned out third floor and boarded up windows on the first. Lucile had thought it was abandoned. Then she packed up all her things onto the dolly. She hauled them past the building, past the empty gravel lot, and under the stretch of trees. She stopped at the gas station to ponder the last hot dog on the rollers. She left it and continued to the motel. With her things put away, she took a moment to breathe and contemplate the strange smell of living stagnation and cigarettes that lingered in the room.

She could just call it night, she could just leave well enough alone.

Lucile slipped on her hoodie and set off, all the way back to the hidden bar. To her surprise the interior was well maintained, even welcoming. Her mark sat at the counter.

Billie's eyes looked in the direction of a bottle of gin caked in dust on a shelf behind the counter, but he wasn't looking at it. He didn't sense the condensation dripping on fingers, he didn't greet or listen to the regulars coming in. He hadn't in months.

"Do you serve food," asked an unusual voice.

"I have burgers tonight," said The Bartender.

"Perfect."

He turned to see the fortune teller climbing onto the stool to his left, he took a drink and tried to settle back into his stupor.

"So, you'd prefer to find answers at the bottom of a glass?"

Billie gathered that he was being addressed but didn't reply.

"Or are you just too good for a reading?"

"No. I just- don't believe in it."

"You're not the only one," she sighed in a bitter tone. "Do you believe in keeping promises?"

"Yes," he said reflexively and lazily.

"So, you'll still buy me a drink then."

"That wasn't a promise," he said, but The Bartender appeared before them and waited until he continued, "I'll have another and one for her."

"What are we drinking?"

"Applejack and cider, local."

"Fun. Let's see what answers I can find in it."

He sipped his drink. She ate her food. Occasionally he'd glance over to her. Mostly he watched his glass, but perhaps his mood wasn't as dower. She visited the ladies' room, on return took up a napkin and continued drying her hands judiciously. She cleaned a spot on the counter and pulled out her deck of cards. She looked to see if he was bothered but couldn't tell. She began shuffling, perhaps it helped her to relax.

The room hummed with chatter. The two were silent.

The Bartender took away her finished dishes, "how'd you hear about my place, miss?"

"I just followed him."

"Is that right. Would you like another drink?"

"I shouldn't."

"I'll bring water," The Bartender gave a meaningful look to Billie, "would you like water?"

"One more."

"A third it is."

"A third," said Lucile, musingly.

Billie didn't respond.

The Bartender returned and asked "And how long will you be in town?"

"Just a few days. See the town, see the people, tell some fortunes."

Billie interjected, "do you get cold wearing that costume?"

"No," she paused briefly, forming an explanation, "I run hot when I'm working."

"How does that work; you're wearing a sweatshirt in doors."

"You're wearing a jacket."

The Bartender quietly moved to serve another customer.

"I work outside all day, cold gets into the skin. You're going to get sick out there."

"Thanks for the concern, but I really don't get cold when I'm working, in fact," she stopped to remove her sweatshirt, "Now I'm ready to tell your fortune."

"What?"

"Takes a while when you don't cooperate, but I think my cards finally have your scent."

"I'm not interested."

"Well I am, and now I'm going to show you that it works." she said with a flick of her hair and turning to deal onto the counter between them.

Billie's eyes wandered over her, still pondering the weather, when they caught on the low collar of her shirt and the luster of her skin.

"What has your life been like recently?" Lucile dealt Two of Cups and then The Tower and then she stopped. Her ritual wasn't complete without the third card, but her fingers already felt pains more clear, strong, and delicate than she expected. She reached to examine his left hand; he might have pulled away if not for the drink he was holding. She found the tan line where his ring used to be.

"Please don't," he demanded weakly.

She whispered, "how long were you married?"

"Five years, together about ten."

On impulse she almost began shuffling again but stopped herself. "How long since she passed?"

"Three months."

Lucile shivered and cleaned up her cards, "I'm sorry." They sat quietly for a moment, she asked, "how are you holding up?"

"Not great," he finished off his drink, choking and coughing at the end.

"No kidding," she teased, maybe a little desperate to change the mood.

He recovered and hung his head for moment, somber and grim. Then a grin creeped across his lips, also appreciating his folly. It was enough jog his drunken mind. "Hey, wait a minute. How did you know?"

"I'm magic," she tapped her finger on the cards with a proud smile.

"You are cute." He said it blankly, waiting for any other thought to enter his mind. "I'm Billie."

"I'm Lucile."

XV - The Devil

"That's a pretty name," said Billie.

Lucile took a sip of water with an incredulous smile.

He continued, "so you really don't get cold?"

"Another of my magic tricks."

Time passed. More people squeezed inside, popping up near them to get a beer from The Bartender, who greeted everyone by name. While a bar was a great place for Lucile to advertise her services, something about a secret little space for the locals in a tiny tourism town made that feel invasive. Her dinner was finished, she could leave at anytime.

She asked, "So you're from here?"

"I'm from Fort Ross, but, well it doesn't matter. I've been here for a good few years. It's good little town." He avoided bringing up his wife anymore than they already had.

"I understand," she said. "So, is there anything I should see while I'm here?"

"Well, it's too early for the farms and trails are a little muddy. There's the museum, and oh! The hot springs, obviously." He paused, his inebriated mind sorting through all the information. He said absently, "you know, I could show you if you want."

"To the hot springs? Geez, you move fast."

It took him a moment before he blushed and turned away. "Not like that, I-"

Lucile snickered. She was torturing the poor drunk. He began to smile too, he couldn't help it. They spoke on a whim and they continued to chat.

Lucile's buzz, light as it was, faded. So too was the conversation. Throughout the evening she'd glanced around the quaint little bar. She caught the eyes of a few other patrons, who clearly didn't recognize her. Hopefully her smile would be enough to bring them to her table tomorrow. She got the sense they weren't just looking at her.

He'd kept her company a while, although the drinks were slowing him down. Billie spoke up, "ah, where are you from?"

"Nowhere special. I live on the road."

"Do you have any family in- nowhere special?"

"I did, but that was a long time ago." She said it with dramatic flair.

He didn't understand that, perhaps because he was drunk. "Why?"

Lucile froze, she hadn't expected a follow up, or maybe she just didn't want to.

"You don't keep in touch with your family while you're on the road? What about, do you have a husband? How do you be married by yourself?"

She began feel her pockets for her wallet, "that's just how it is."

"Do you want to be alone? I don't- forever-" He winced in pain.

He was being genuine, it pushed her even more off balance. She said softly, "I don't want to be trapped."

"Just going around doing tricks for people?"

"I don't do tricks," she said defiantly.

Before the conversation could go on any longer, The Bartender appeared. "How about some water, Bill?"

He took the commanding suggestion, and she signaled to pay her bill and slid off the bar-stool.

"You'releaving?"

"Yes."

"Um, should I walk with you? I mean, it's dark and-"

"I'll be fine on my own."

Billie was silent, but just as she was ready to leave suddenly his head fell into the counter. Her shock quickly turned to concern as what seemed to be a drunken slip was followed with an expression of toxic agony. It was pain on the outside of his skull that shown on his face, both something else seized his insides. The other patrons looked over to see an accident, however Lucile was about to see much more. As she reached out to comfort him a stinging shiver bolted up her arm and stopped at the base of her throat.

He doubled over. She froze. Danger reflexively opened her magician eyes. Staring back were eyes of blue skies and hair of golden silk. The most tender rosy smile stroked his hair with porcelain fingers. The other hand raised towards Lucile, a voltaic claw rendering the air shrill and caustic. Lucile instinctively could not advance nor retreat lest she provoke a reaction from the thing. She shuttered looking upon Its spine bound at the man's waist, viciously retching in syncopated time with the throbbing of its heartless rancid cavity. In the corner of her eye she saw whispɛrs flee, crowding into the corners of the room. It pulled back from her arm and throat but held position, threatening much worse.

Noticing that more heads were turning towards her, Lucile knelt down beside him. She tried to ask him, "are you okay," but the words choked out in fear of the contemptuous eyes leering beside her. He groaned, and most of the patrons resumed their conversations.

"It's going to be okay," she said, but if it was for him or herself, she didn't know. The thing eased back a little. "We need to get you out of here."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You can't stay like this. Take deep breaths."

He managed to pry himself upright and drank some water while It lovingly stroked his chest. Lucile could see the wake of its fingers, the tiny invisible cuts it made into his breɑth. He fought against the migraine as they spoke. "It'll go away, I just need a minute."

Perhaps being rebuked led her to try harder, in a hushed voice she asked, "did your wife have blue eyes?"

"Yeah, what about it."

Perhaps Lucile just wanted to be right, maybe she was just panicking. ""Your headache- I think you're being haunted."

"What did you just say?"

She froze, not for creature, it was only occupied kissing his cheek. She froze in uncertainty as the man's face filled with disgust. Indeed, even The Bartender, who appeared with more water and a bag of ice, waited on his next words.

"Why would you say that," Billie's voice grew louder, loud enough to cut through the room. "Why would say that satanic crap."

Lucile felt a surge around her arm and jerked back. She couldn't maintain her sight. She couldn't see the thing wrapped around him, but she could feel the room's eyes on her. She stepped back. "I just want to help."

The sudden rush sobered him, enough for his mind to race, but maybe not enough to decide his own words. "I don't need help from some bum."

Those words hurt her, angered her. She turned and left. He sat a while as the charged air around him diffused. Everyone thought it best to leave him be.

Introducing Lucile D. Rodgers

5'4", 104lbs, age 28, brown eyes, brown hair. She's traveled all around the western half of America, amusing public squares and shopping complexes along the way. She foretells doom and glory from under a fanciful turquoise shawl dealing cards onto a table adorned in a similar purple cloth, and as long as she keeps everyone's attention they won't notice the mismatching tacky designs were scrounged from the depths of a thrift store.

First impression from the mind of Billie -

"The way her golden skin pops from under that white top is something. She's a small woman, except for- well she has a bit of beak. It might be cute if she wasn't so weird. It seemed like she might be nice, fun even, but maybe that was all sales. They say you can't be too careful with strangers, but what about the stranger? What kind of a person chooses live as a performing tramp with no home, no family, no future? A strange person, I guess."

Introducing Billie Johnathan Bowling

5'11", 191lbs, age 25, blue eyes with light brown hair and an unkempt short beard. Built thick with a work ethic to match. No one had anything bad to say about the young man with an earnest demeanor and quiet smile to compliment Marianne's charm, but without her he seems more miserable by the day. People are learning it's best to step aside for the specter bundled in a black jacket.

First impression from the mind of Lucile -

"I thought the sad sack could use some cheering up, I saw some curiosity in his breαth. But he's a lumbering beast, a drunkard and a jerk. Except the real problem is that uncanny abomination clinging to him. It burned my arm, it’s only a matter of time before he turns it on someone else or it kills him. Gosh, I need a hot shower, it's been a long time since I felt this freaked out."

I - The Magician -reversed

Lucile got up. The sensation of tender burnt flesh on her arm wouldn't allow any more rest, even if the skin appeared only a little red. Just above her wrist, the burn formed a circle in the shape of the grip of a boney twisted hand. In the mirror she looked at the thin line running up her arm to her neck, it stung when she moved, but thankfully that section was rather unnoticeable. The damage set in gradually, and with her eyes she could see a darker mark that stained her skin, blocking her breɑth. It was a wiɳd burn, and all of the affected flesh would die.

"Get dressed, buy something to eat, buy a newspaper, grab the cart, it's not your fault." Lucile tried moving closer to the center of town today, hoping to catch more of the visitors to the hot springs. However, there weren't many spaces to set up. The parking lot was lined with bushes, and the sidewalk was lined with doors and windows or blocked by trees in decorative guards. She'd found a suitable spot outside a restaurant, when a waitress hurriedly emerged to tell her a sign would go there.

Maybe She'd needed to pop into a business, convince them she'd attract customers if they let her set up outside, but a growing feeling told her it would be easier said than done, the feeling of being watched. About a block down road two people spoke while glancing at her. There were eyes in the windows and turning heads. Maybe they looked with curiosity, perhaps judgment.

She could do it, with a smile and joke she could carve out a space for herself. It was cold out. She needed to get started. She turned back. At her previous spot, she set about unstrapping her table and chairs, laying out her cloth and dawning her decorative shawl. Most importantly positioning the dolly and the tip jar strapped to its upper rung within comfortable reach of clients.

Normally, she would have began shuffling and dealing to pass the time and stay warm. She'd check the paper and do simple readings on sports or the weather, she'd test the fate of the town around her, which was often too broad a subject to a specific, but led to plenty of fun speculation. However, she could only think of last night. She wanted to read that man's fate, but her cards had long since lost the scent. There was nothing she could do, except for contacting the town witch. She fully planned to, that monster should not be ignored.

Her arm and neck stung in the breeze.

Before she could dig further, the witch arrived. Dorothy parked her car and immediately jumped to business, demanding, "were you here last night?"

"What, yes." Lucile recoiled at the sudden harshness.

"The Steward sensed-" Dorothy paused. "Your arm, are you okay?"

"Yeah,"

"You found It?"

"Unfortunately."

"What happened." Any concern shown was quickly replaced with demands again.

Lucile starred. "It got away."

"Of course it did. Tell me what happened, step by step."

Lucile took time to consider, her upper lip trembling. She looked over her arm. "What do you plan to do with it?" When she didn't receive a reply, she reassured, "I'm just curious."

"It's not your business." The statement hung between them. Dorothy sighed, "where did it happen?"

"Just over there, while I was walking back to the motel."

"What were you doing?"

"Just walking."

"No magic? Then why attack you? What did it do?"

"It grabbed me, then let go. It happened so fast."

"What did it look like? Any idea of its nature?"

"No, it was gone before I realized. I was shocked."

Dorothy thought. "You'll stay alert, right?"

"Yes, but I can't keep my eyes running around the clock. I'm not that good."

"Of course."

Lucile stifled her own scowl and replaced it with spitefully sweet smile, "I'm so sorry I couldn't help more. How about a reading?"

"No, that's fine; I'll think up a plan. I'll come back with something for your burn too." The witch walked around, examining the area.

Lucile set aside her things and announced, "I need coffee," to get away from the witch's snooping. A ways down the sidewalk a long sigh seeped out of her, acknowledging what she'd just done. "Why did I do that," she muttered, but then another thought occurred to her, one regarding the Stewards efficacy and the oscillating strength she felt in the town's domain.

She needed to clear her head, but even in the cafe she felt out of place. Something in the way the barista looked her up and down, the quiet smirk on the lips. Something in the way the barista spoke, perfectly polite and friendly, but with a hard punctuated tone that invited no conversation. In Lucile these things awoke a deep and old understanding of rejection and uncanniness, something which she did her best to not acknowledge.

She returned to her table, Dorothy was gone. She took a deep breath. It occurred to her that she wasn't without reconnaissance ability. She began shuffling, slowly and carefully sampling the Steward's breαth out of the domain. Lucile dealt the cards and read of Ruby's weakness, her desperate ambition, and finally: XIII - Death, Queen of Swords, Two of Swords. Lucile’s face went pale and although the details were hard to pin down without knowing more about the coven, she knew she wanted to avoid getting involved. However, it was her next set of readings that dashed that plan. She tried to read how the Steward would handle Billie, and the results were muddled and unreadable. Maybe getting involved wasn't a choice.

The frustration of it spurred her to find another way, it occurred to her that there was another person involved in this, one whose fate might possibly tell her something interesting, a person that she might find in the graveyard.

The High Priestess -reversed

Billie felt terrible. The hangover was about the same as all the others recently and nothing compared to the migraine of last night. That wasn't the trouble though; it was the memory of woman he met yesterday and the genuine hurt in her eyes. The rage he felt, shocking and sticky, was disproportional; he knew that. He didn't act on it, he didn't do anything wrong, she did. His head was throbbing.

At work, Sean made a comment about the event, "I heard you had a bad night."

After work, which was a long exhausting slog of a day, he came straight home. The headache wasn't fading any further, neither was the guilt. An impulse drew him to the bar, to have a drink. But then he wondered if the fortune teller would be in his path. He didn't want to deal with it, and that feeling almost made him angry at her all over again.

He made a slapdash effort to get groceries, buying anything that was easy to prepare. It was all food, but none would be meals. He also bought an ample supply of beer. While handing over money to the cashier something strange happened. She placed her hand on his, "are you okay?"

"What?"

"I heard about the fight last night."

"Oh, ah, I'm fine. Thanks."

"Well at least it didn't bruise! Take care, Bill."

He walked out dumbfounded, but getting home took priority.

After dinner the phone rang.

"Hey, it's Dorothy. I heard you got attacked last night."

"Attacked?" He thought he heard someone else cackle in the background.

"Billie, tell me what happened with that woman. Anything strange? I'll-"

"Wait wait. What are you talking about? Why are you so worked up?" He raised his voice; it was the headache getting to him. Marianne had been good friends with Dorothy and Sherry. The three practically ran the church alongside the pastor, after having taken over from the older volunteers.

Dorothy seemed to compose herself. "Sherry was just telling me that the woman from out of town slapped you."

"Why is-" He understood now, what happened at the store. "Sherry why are you making up stories?!"

On the other end of the line, Dorothy pulled the telephone from her ear. A sudden burst of rage and static filled the church's kitchen. Sherry replied, both loud enough be picked up and return fire, "I'm not! They said you got in a fight."

"No one got hit."

Dorothy asked in a softer tone, "would you tell me what happened?"

"No." A lost memory of his sweet Marianne leaned upon his shoulders as what seemed to be frustration pinched all the nerves of his skull. "You two need to stop gossiping." He hardly managed to get the words out, both from physical strain and emotional restraint.

"How about we talk at Easter this weekend-"

He hung up the phone, harder that he should have. "God!" He growled. He flew to the beer and then to the chair and desperately tried to relax. He could not. The silence of his empty home soaked into mind until he had to fill it. “We had fun, we danced- All I have is this burning in my gut and this ache in my head." Billie stopped, panting. When his breathing calmed, "there's nothing left." He stood, his arms trembled with a pained rage, tempered by exhaustion. He wanted to fling himself, the strike and crash down upon it all, upon what, upon the silent air of his empty home. He could almost feel fingers within his fingers, impulses to squeeze in his fist on nothing.

He traveled with a certain melancholic fervor, marching up the road to the walkway that led up the hill. It overlooked the town and hosted the cemetery, a single terrace built into the long slope of the back side. The town’s history wasn't very long, the graves were few. Immediately the view violated his expectations.

Next to the grave of his wife was a table, chairs, and the fortune teller shuffling cards.

The Moon

Billie could feel his face getting hotter, while Lucile froze upon noticing him.

"I'm sorry, I'll give you some privacy," she said in the most personable tone possible, but before she could move he exhaled and chuckled under his breath, his shoulders drooped. He took the other chair and plopped down beside her, never once looking her in the eye, only looking at the tombstone of Marianne.

The evening breeze rolled between them, Billie zipped his jacket up, Lucile started shuffling again. They sat for a while. Periodically she'd glance over, hoping she wasn't disturbing him. If he was then he didn't show it, he just seemed resigned.

Without looking he asked, "why are you here?"

"Looking for something."

"I'm not sure I'm okay with that."

"I don't blame you," she said.

He thought to himself for a while. He leaned forward, face planted in his palms. It was muffled but she could still hear him say, "I don't know why I'm here." He sat up and finally looked at her, "you were right. Something has to change."

She nodded. Again, they sat a while in silence.

"You're not gonna get many customers in a graveyard."

"No, but I didn't have any today anyways."

"You didn't, huh?" Billie paused, he may have guessed a reason for that. "About what you said last night. You seriously believe in that stuff?"

She spoke carefully, "I didn't mean to insult you. And yes, because it's real."

"You didn't insult me." He turned to look at the grave, "is that what are you doing here?"

"Yes, but I didn't find what I was looking for."

"And what's that?"

"I was trying to learn more about you and her, but all the fates here are resolved." She tilted her head, he looked curious. "It's a graveyard, I should have known."

He nodded and didn't protest.

The sun was going down, a chilly gust blew past them, Billie watched her thin shawl flutter. He pondered what she said about not getting cold, it was hard to doubt when she acted like it was a warm summer day. Then he noticed the dark mark on her right arm. "Hey, did something happen to your arm?"

"This, this was from last night." She looked hesitant to explain, maybe a little comforted that someone noticed, but then she spoke with caution, "Would you listen to what I have to say?"

He too chose caution, "maybe, can you prove what you’re saying?"

Lucile began shuffling faster, "sometimes I wish I was better at the basics, but this is what I'm good at. Do you have any secrets that you've never told anyone?"

"There was one person that knew all my secrets."

She nodded and laid out the cards. "Alright, I'll work with that. Place a hand on the cards and tell me about her, anything."

Although hesitant, he did. "Her name is Marianne Law. Her folks own Law's Orchard here in town. She was dedicated to the family business, got me in it too. I think the only fruit she ever ate was their own apples. Except, well, don't tell anybody, but her dad makes cider, juice and the hard stuff. She brought a little bottle of that cider to school every day in fall. Loved it, but she turned twenty-one, I remember it so clearly, her dad gives her a glass of the hard stuff, he turns away for a split second and me and her mom both watch her gag on

it. I like beer, I like that cider too, it's good, but she hated it so much. I think she thought it was going to be juice with zing. I was cracking up the whole night as she tried to pretend she liked it. She was determined though, juice and rum became her go to. She never told her dad, I guess because he never asked. He still doesn't know, that birthday was one of the first things he talked about after she-"

He trailed off in the end, Lucile swept up the cards from under his fingers. She dealt cards, this time face down, as she sorted out the positioning of a larger and more complicated array. He couldn't make sense of it.

"When was her birthday," she asked.

"August 23rd."

"Then it was Valentine's Day, 10 years ago. You were hesitant to show your affection publicly, you'd overdone it before. But then she was approached by another boy, you didn't take action and you regretted it. Your faith in her paid off, she came to you. That was the day you decided to marry her."

Billie nodded and said, "I don't how started but it was big thing that year, all the girls walking around showing off fancy bouquets and chocolates they got, guys were trying to one up each other. I remember one girl getting stuff from two guys and bragging about it, but didn't plan on responding to either; The way she talked about it bothered me. A friend of mine bolted out the door at lunch to go get something better when he saw how outmatched he was.

"Anyways, it was our first valentines after we started dating, all I got her was box of chalk hearts. I kinda embarrassed her earlier in the year; I didn't know what to do. After school I was looking for her, and this guy goes up to her with a bouquet. She leaned in and whispered something to him; I think my face was redder than the roses. Then she turned around and grabbed my hand, marched us right out of the building. We just sat and shared those hearts until her mom showed up to get her. Then she gets up, looks me dead in the eye and says, 'next year I want roses.' I swore it would be every year.

Again, the breeze filled the gap till he perked up, "they didn't let anyone do valentine's presents at school the next year, I guess a bunch of people went home it tears and parents complained."

He relaxed, maybe a little astonished. "Magic, huh?"

"Yep."

"Okay, what do you have to tell me?"

Lucile spoke clearly and confidently, as if maybe she'd rehearsed, "This burn on my arm is from your incident last night. I saw that a- spirit was entwined with you, which is not normal and does not look healthy. It had blonde hair, blue yes, and did not like me getting close to you." She noted her arm with a gesture. "I believe that was the source of your pain."

His bore the expressionless expression of someone thinking too many things at once. He started with the first thought he could formulate, "she wouldn't try to hurt me."

"No, but sometimes when you dance you step on each other's feet."

His next revelation was far more grim, "she shouldn't be here, she should be in heaven."

Lucile was utterly unprepared for this, "maybe she got lost."

Again, he held his face in his palms.

She spoke, almost panicked, perhaps trying to make him feel better, "It's okay, accidents happen, she tripped, and I'll help you pick her back up."

Billie looked up and asked, "You saw her, can you talk to her?"

This time it was Lucile that hesitated. Perhaps it was the resoluteness in his eyes that until now were distant and lost, or perhaps it was the growing knot in her stomach.

"I've been a wreck," he said, "I've been so angry and lost. I haven't been the same without her."

Lucile responded, "I could, maybe, I've never done that before. You understand things can't stay like this?"

"Of course, I just want to- I don't know what I want. I want to talk to her, one more time."

"Okay- we might be able to do that."

"Right now," he asked optimistically.

Lucile looked at him with intensity, then leaned in the looked him over before saying, "if I get in close I can see that your breαth is a little strange but she's not here right now. Has anything like last night happened before?"

They discussed his abysmal condition, unable to determine the difference between any prior episodes and the consequences of his growing drinking habit. He was a mess.

"Give me a little time to think about where to start, and for now pay attention to how you're feeling."

"I can do that," he said almost excited.

Lucile sat back in her chair, "I'll guess I'll be in town till this is over."

"Is that a problem?"

"No, just need to earn enough to keep myself afloat."

"The rumors might be affecting business."

"That explains it."

Billie declared, "You know what, you do the magic stuff. I'll see about the rumors."

The Empress -reversed

"Come here, child."

Donna jolted to attention as an unheard voice licked over her skin. The girl put down her schoolwork and went to the hidden courtyard. She crept into the dark and stumbled over the roots covered by the blanket. Cold was the air, too cold to be comfortable for long. On her knees she met the gaze of piercing red irises stained by time and power.

"Why are your eyes closed, child?"

"I was just doing homework."

"You must practice till it is second nature. It should cause a witch more effort to close her eyes then not."

Donna clasped her eyes shut and reignited them. The courtyard, in truth, was brimming and saturated with the sweet reds and oranges of Ruby's domain, and the canopy glittering with the whispɛrs perched among the leaves. Each fruit, although an apple physically, was ornamented with distinct glowing patterns and static that shifted between solid æther and current with the heartbeat of the tree.

"Good," Ruby said. "Your sister is in the garden, and Dorothy is- wasting time at the church. Do you know what each has?"

Donna shook her head.

"The full bodied breαth of a proper witch."

Donna took the hint and inhaled, feeling the wiɳd clash with the circɻlation of her lungs. The ambient magical radiation of her skin rose and blanketed her. The chill left her, and in its place was a conversation with the sky. Listening to it, feeling it, pushing back and holding true, it was taxing but not beyond her.

"Better. How old are you?"

"Ten."

"It's my fault, I haven't been able to instruct you these past couple years. Practice, you must if you are ever going to make something of yourself." Ruby was firm, and the girl timid, nodding but shrinking away. Ruby looked to the fruit. "Tell me, do you like any of them?"

Donna chose one and was challenged to identify its properties. She could not. It was a painful and slow prodding interrogation about her knowledge. Eventually the girl reached up to study the subject closer. The breαth of her hands formed and melded along the apple and through it she knew it's flurreling zazz. She startled away, as if she brushed against a hot stove.

Ruby softly shook her head, disappointed. "Spend more time among the whispɛrs, study them. This tree was my life's work, these Murmur Fruit will allow you gain mastery quickly, there is a limit how many worδs can be engraved upon the self. You must know what you're eating first, choose very wisely to compliment your spell palette. Make yourself into a splendid witch."

Donna was slow to respond. She understood the pressure of what she was told but none of the praxis. "But what if I can't?"

"Then you'll work harder."

Dorothy stood before the icon of Jesus Christ. The weekly women's group was finished; everyone would be chit chatting for a while. She had this moment to herself in the dark of the hall, among the somber whispɛrs that held vigil around alter like lanterns burning oil of townsfolk's faith. She often spent time treating the wiɳd of the church and arranging the whispɛrs before the lord, although they never stayed in place.

Crucifix in hand she prayed. "Lord, my mother will be with you soon. She's not the only mother I've known, but she's the one that has loved me. She has not loved you. But she has done good for many people. I pray that you'll forgive her. I pray that you'll take her painlessly, and that I can hold her with my owns hands when you do. And- and please see me through this darkness. Amen."

Introducing Donna Whitaker and her older sister Becky.

Donna: 4'6", 53lbs, age 10.
Becky: 5'3", 93lbs, age 14.

Private thoughts from Ruby Everseed -

"Had I known they were black I may have reconsidered adopting them. It's already hard enough growing up as a witch, let alone sticking out like a sore thumb. The poor things were passed around the foster care system for years, and the elder had a look in her eye to prove it when we first met. When she began to recall how her parents were killed and tell others about it, that is how they landed in the coven's clutches. It was a coincidence that at the same time I was looking for more wards so that Dorothy would have help when I'm gone. Now that we have them, I can't bring myself to send them away.

Becky is motivated, eager to avoid any disapproval or punishment. I've seen that attitude before, it's not healthy but it will do to keep her focused. Donna, however, is so timid and clingy towards her sister I can't imagine either one ever getting anything done. They've started their training late; I'll have to be firmer with her if there is to be any hope for her future.

I should have Dorothy look into a solution for their hair. A true Witch can make use of every strand, but how do you manage living with such nappy bush on you head?"

The Sun -?

Shuffling, worrisome shuffling. Lucile found herself camped outside the bar, with no customers and nothing to do, except to think about man coming to visit her. Periodically she'd wince at an absent-minded turn of her wrist, a reminder of the abomination that would be coming along with him. She had some ideas of how to handle the situation, but ideas and means are different things.

Movement caught her eye, but it wasn't the man she was expecting; it was a young woman who also wore a dubious expression on her narrow face, framed on either side with chaotic curls of hair.

"Welcome! Shall Madam Delphina read your fate?" The girl nodded but with a certain strain in the neck, the kind Lucile recognized as holding back a sob. In a gentler way she said, "go ahead, sit down. I'm Lucile. What's your name?"

"My name's Lizzy. I'm pregnant."

Lucile couldn't help but cock her to the side, "how old are you?"

"Sixteen."

The fortune teller ceased her shuffling and set down the deck. "How can I help?"

Elizabeth Crawford was tired, the last few days hadn't been easy on the poor girl, and she just sat staring back. She wasn't trying to find the right words, she couldn't, she could only wait until her words were ready to be spoken. A moment passed, and the fancifully dressed stranger across the table did not stir. The words came, "I always wanted to be a mom."

Those words choked up both their throats.

Lucile prompted, "But not like this?"

"Mom and Dad are pissed."

"Mm."

"I haven't been to school. And I haven't told him. It's a little soon, but I still want to be a mom," she finished with a certain glowing conviction, faint as it was.

"And you're parents?"

"They were angry- I've heard them talking. They've suggested- something I don't like, but they're not forcing me to do anything. I've really made a mess for them."

"So, what's bothering you?"

"Well, I need to tell him. I can't rely on my parents forever, and I need to raise my baby, I need money. I need to get married. We never talked about this, about us or a baby. What if he's mad at me? I know I can do it, but I want him there, and what about the baby, it needs a father."

"Is there a reason you think he'll be mad?"

"The baby changing my life is one thing, but I don't want it to ruin his."

"Hun, this is his responsibility too," the fortune teller said firmly and instinctively.

"I know, but, I could make it go away if I just did what my parents said. I don't know what to do, I messed up."

Lucile had so many questions and was afraid of the answers. Lecturing was not her place. "Is there something you wanted to ask the cards?"

"Can you tell me what the right decision is?"

"I can tell you what fate has in store, fate is made of the decisions, decisions we make."

Lizzy thought and shook her head, "I already know what I need to do. He'll listen, won't he?"

Lucile picked the deck back up and announced their conclusion, "your actions have led you here. You know what you want. We can't control other people, but we can talk to them. Show him the confidence you've shown me."

Lizzy smiled, "It's Easter; I think I'll spend the weekend praying for strength. On Monday, I'm going to school."

"Let me know how it goes."

As the girl marched away Lucile melted onto her table, and when the girl turned back to wave Lucile frantically projected that nothing was wrong.

Ace of Cups

At lunch, Billie stood by the phone in the orchard's office. With a sharp inhale he dialed Sherry, and when she didn't answer he exhaled in relief.

Then she called back, "Hello, who's call did I miss?"

"Ah- hey Sherry, it's Bill."

"Oh my gosh! Is it true you were walking home with the woman that slapped you the other night?!"

"How do you hear these things?" Before she could begin, he got to business, "Look. We weren't walking home together, we were just going the same way. And she didn't slap me. And I need you to stop people from saying that. And I'm sorry for getting heated yesterday."

Sherry was silent, a rare occasion, then her counter began, "oh really? You're sorry?"

"Yes. I'm serious about correcting those rumors, Lucile- she needs to make money."

"You're on a first name basis with her?"

"Sherry, please."

"Okay, but only if you come help decorate for Easter on Saturday."

The thought gave him pause, "you're probably shorthanded, huh."

She didn't play around any further, "we'd love to have your help, Bill."

"Alright, let me think about it."

"See you Saturday."

"Hey, only one customer today," asked Billie, noting the bill in the tip jar. He sat down with Lucile, as they had planned.

"Yeah, but she didn't give that to me. I always start the jar myself." His curious look prompted her, "I can't charge money for the reading, it ruins the magic, but I also need more than spare change. I figure if they see a five in there they'll think, 'oh gee the last guy left a five, I don't want to be cheap,' and match it. I think it helps, right until someone drops in a couple ones or extra change."

"That's smart," he said, "You should tell people around here to start doing that."

"It's not that smart," she began shuffling, "you think so?"

"Our crops are worth something, but the town lives on our visitors. It's a good idea." They smiled. He moved on, "no money, huh. Sorry 'bout that. Why don't you move to the middle of town or go talk to people?"

"The rumors aren't your fault. That's just how things go," she said. "If they've already made up their minds, there's no changing it. I can't force people."

He recalled being forced. "So where are we- doing this?"

"Your home might hold strongest memories, but I'd like to take things a little slower and build up; I don't want you to have another episode. Was there anywhere you spent time together?"

"How about here at the bar. What'd you think of the food here?"

"Better than the gas station, why?"

"I'm buying you dinner, c'mon." He didn't give her time to protest as he packed up his chair. She collected her things and mentioned returning to her room, but he stopped her. He went to the door and hollered inside, "are you fine with her putting her stuff here," he looked back and waved her in.

Sheepishly Lucile left her dolly under the coat rack. Before she was done folding her shawl, Billie was starting more trouble. He stopped halfway across the room, starring at the table of regulars, two men and a couple. Then he approached the table; He greeted them with simple pleasantries, before making a move.

"When did you guys here?"

The husband replied, "Just a little while ago."

"So you all walked past the fortune teller on your way in, yeah? Did any of you get a reading?" He bordered tact and passive aggression.

They all looked in her direction, she looked mortified.

"Well, we just didn't have anything to ask, isn't that right, dear?"

Billie didn't give the wife time to reinforce. "You can just do it for fun. She loves doing it, you can't stop her from reading your fortune. This is Lucile; She'll be in town for a while. Lucile, this is Jacob and Jack, they work the corn fields. This is Josh and Jocelyn, they run the auto shop together on second street. Come here, sit down, show them that thing you showed me."

Lucile approached the table as Billie made room for her. The performer seemed to be quite nervous. Her eyes looked anywhere but at the people looking at her, till she happened to spy the wedding rings of the couple.

"How long have you been married," she asked. Out of habit she had already snuck the deck of cards into her hands, and when the wife answered the shuffling began. Once the cards were on the table she burst into her routine, delving into the couple’s past and future.

Billie approached the counter and asked, "what do you got going for dinner tonight?"

"Grilled cheese and tomato stew," said The Bartender.

"I'll take two and a beer."

"You seem to be in a good mood today."

"I'm trying to make some changes."

As the moments passed more people filtered into the bar, the place grew lively, but none matched the table with the fortune teller. She weaved in and out of character, chatting up the table a spinning a yarn of things to come. Ears around the room listened in on the performance.

Meanwhile, Billie sat with two cooling bowls of stew.

The Bartender appeared, "I take it that you two worked things out."

"Yeah, just a misunderstanding."

"Drink will do that."

"Did you hear those rumors?"

"I hear everything."

"I'm trying to fix it."

"The cold truth doesn't travel as fast as hot goss," said The Bartender, who waited for a response, but Billie's attention was elsewhere. "She's been at it a while."

"Yeah, she has."

"Jealous?" He joked.

"No, we just had something to talk about. Grab me another beer, would ya."

He waited a moment longer till he saw another woman start making her way towards the table. He moved to intercept. Dodging around tables and people, he got there just before the curious onlooker extended the performance. He tapped the back of Lucile's chair and leaned in, "hey, ah, foods getting cold."

Everyone said goodbye, and the curious woman slipped away, maybe thinking to catch the fortune teller another time. But Lucile seemed concerned, maybe she saw something they didn't. They left.

Billie said, "alright, so we could take the food over there and-"

"Why were you angry," Lucile interrupted.

"I wasn't angry, did I seem angry?" She looked disquieted, he asked, "are you angry?"

"A little, I can't believe you did that to me out of nowhere."

"People need to meet you, show them the rumors are wrong."

"Forcing a couple people to talk to me isn't going to help."

"Well, if you don't try how does it ever get better?"

She didn't have a response to that, "thanks for getting me out of there."

"Sure thing."

They hadn't shared much conversation while eating in the dim back corner of the bar; it was dreary. The stew was something halfway between tomato soup and chili, not really succeeding at either but good enough. Lucile cleaned her hands and returned just as The Bartender replaced their dishes with a candle the brighten the mood. As she got into her rhythm preparing the cards, she eyed Billie. The burn on the back of her hand stung as she shuffled.

"Hey, I think you should stop drinking," Lucile offered in concern. He paused with his beer on his lips. She continued, "it's just that we need consistency to figure out exactly what's going on."

"Done."

She was a little surprised by the swift resolution.

"Are you ready to start?" Billie reached into his shirt pocket and unfolded a note. "Um, I wrote some stuff down that I wanted to say to her. It sounds like we might not get to that tonight though-" He trailed off as he met her eye, "what's wrong?"

Lucile shook her expression free, perhaps overwhelmed by the sadness of it, maybe by something else. "Nothing. You're right, we probably need some time."

First Lucile told fortunes. She asked for his patience while searching the future to find when these troubles would be resolved, and what hints might lead her there. She shuffled and dealt over and over, having him place a hand on the cards to sample his breɑth periodically. Each time was a new configuration growing in complexity and each time she grew more discontent.

"I need a break," she said, frustration showing through. His expression shifted, so she explained, "I can't read your future. Which could be fine, it's fine. It means I'm tide up in however this gets resolved."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm the reader for other people, I can't read myself. Same reason I can't take money, the transaction makes me part of their fate and messes everything up."

"Okay, but you still take tips?"

"I absolutely take tips. The weird thing is, I can't read your future clearly on a lot of other things too. I think your condition might be interfering with my magic, like I’m accidentally reading two things at once, maybe. It's actually really frustrating. Let me try a little more."

This time she looked into his past, and this offered no resistance. She found exactly when the thing became entwined with his body. Two months ago It found him in his sleep, quelling his restless, keeping him

company in the dark solitude of his bed, which was still new to him. It stayed and grew. There was another person's fate entwined in this moment, although she couldn't tell who. What all this information told her, she did not say. Nor did she tell him of these events; she moved on.

"Alright, I'm going to try something. Give me your hands and close your eyes." She put her cards away.

Billie complied and waited with her fingers on his. Nothing happened. She insisted on trying again and a third time.

"Do you feel anything?"

"Not really, just got a little tingly. What were you doing?"

She sighed and sat back. "And old ritual my teacher did for me a long time ago. A sort of jumpstart where I push my breαth into you to wake up your body's own magical systems. I guess I can't do it."

"Breath?"

The Bartender slipped in to provide them with more water. The two of them realized the bar was eerily quieter than it was a moment ago. "You guys need anything?"

"No," said Billie, "thanks."

"Enjoy yourselves."

Billie asked, "can we try again?"

Lucile watched him, her eyes were strained, her breαth was diluting. "I think I wore myself out." She shook her head, but just as she relaxed her eyes she caught a ripple in his breαth. She tried to reignite her vision, but her blinking frenzy revealed nothing.

"Alright, I understand," he said.

She took a deep breath. "I need more time to observe you. We need to try out different things until I can find a trigger. Can we meet up tomorrow?"

"Yeah, only- they were hassling me to come help at the church, do some decorating for Easter."

"Do you usually?"

"With Marianne, sometimes. If she wasn't with me or her parents, she was at the church. I haven't been over there since the funeral. Feels awkward."

"Sounds perfect. I'll come."

"Wait, that's not what I meant. I was trying to get out of it."

"It's the exact kind of place we need."

"What about you, do you need to earn some money?"

"With what customers?"

He couldn't protest further. They spent some more time talking then said goodnight.

Approaching the door, Lucile had nearly forgotten her things were under the coat rack. She made sure that nothing was missing, but she was pleasantly surprised. There was another bill in the tip jar.

Four of Rings

Lucile left her motel room prepared for a breezy morning walk. The church was on the opposite side of town, surely it wouldn't take that long to walk. Reflexively she checked her hip, ensuring her leather deck case was present and full. To her surprise, a truck honked at her, pulling up from across the road. Billie called to her from the window.

"You didn't have to come get me," she replied.

"Least I could do."

The drive was the first time she'd been through the whole strip. From the window she saw the restaurants, the hot springs and the pool, the little knick-knack shop, the fields over yonder, and the little side streets that hid away the neighborhood under the hillside. Then they broke free of the town and came to the church. It was a newer construction, doubling as both a house of God and a community center sitting in view of the rolling brush-lands west of town.

On their way in, Lucile asked, "wait, this isn't going to be a thing, is it?"

"With other people? I don't think so."

They got their answer as Sherry welcomed them at the door, "Billie! It's good to see you. Dorothy couldn't make it."

"Dorothy?" Lucile perked up.

"Oh, a friend of mine, busy with some work. And who is this, Bill?"

"Sherry, Lucile. Lucile, Sherry"

Unbothered by the lackluster introduction for she already had intel on the traveler, Sherry barreled forward, "thank you so much for coming to help. You know how it is, everyone's trying to get things sorted for a spring burst of business. Anyways, Bill, would you grab these boxes down for me?" She led them to storage closet, and while he was distracted, she quickly pulled Lucile into the kitchen. "What's the story, you and him?"

"No, there's no story."

Sherry gave an incredulous and dramatic stare, "you've been spending a lot of time together for people that just met, and no one's held a conversation with him in months."

The fortune teller had to craft a workable excuse. Lowering her voice, "he needed someone to talk to, I talk to people for a living. I'll be moving on eventually and I needed someone to show me around while I was here."

"Show you around, huh?"

"There's nothing going on; there's only one woman in his mind right now."

"Hmm. Of course."

"What are you talking about," asked Billie, finished with his task.

"I was just getting to know her. I've heard so much after all," Sherry assured him.

"Hey, remember what I asked you about?"

"Yes, and I've told everyone I've talked to I was wrong about her hitting you. I shouldn't have embellished that part."

"You embellished it?"

There was a singe of frustration in his voice, and Lucile felt impulse of fear. She quickly looked him over. However, if there had been any activity, she didn't catch it.

"Wishful thinking," Sherry looked to Lucile with a grin, "it's about time someone snapped him out of it."

Billie was uncomfortably silent.

She moved on with excessive charm, "You know I'm so grateful that a visitor would come to volunteer like this. I sure I won't be able to stop myself from telling everyone how lovely you are."

Then she cast both of them out of the kitchen, saying it only takes one person to boil eggs, and sent them off to set up tables and chairs in the common area.

"So," they said in unison.

"Go ahead," said Billie.

"Let's talk about Marianne while we work."

"Exactly what I was going to ask about."

Lucile focused her eyes. She watched the breαth of his body as the wiɳd danced around it, she watched for what lurked within.

They rolled out carts of folding chairs and tables from storage and began setting them around the room as they talked.

"Were things good between you," Lucile asked.

"Yeah, they were great." He said it as if there was nothing else to be explained.

She dug deeper, "a lot of people that get married young regret it. They find out there's more to each other than they thought, and not all of it pretty. In all your time with her, what did you find?"

"Nothing. She was perfect."

"What do you mean: perfect?"

He stopped what he was doing, "Everything. Marianne was perfect. She was beautiful, she was honest, I never had to worry about what she was thinking. If there were any problems she'd let me know. It was so easy talk to her."

"Okay. Can you remember any problems?" Lucile was searching for clues, but there was a little something else in her voice.

"Sure, we had some issues when we first started living together, like chores and that sort of thing. I saw her get stressed out about the Christmas pageant once. I pitched in and we got it taken care of. She thanked me, she thanked me a lot. She was honest about that sort of thing too."

Lucile stopped working, "people can't be honest all the time; it's too difficult." He didn't seem to notice, there was a different woman on his mind. His breαth held no irregularities, but it was slightly more voluminous and warm than before, perhaps because he was working.

He finally responded, "I agree; She really was something special, strong."

When they were nearly finished, they realized their sides were uneven. Lucile's was more spread out, "I thought people would want more leg room." Billie's was tightly packed, "we got a lot of people to cram in, they can take it for an hour." They made some adjustments. The tables were ready for all the families to paint eggs together. They moved on to the next task.

Lucile clasped her irritated eyes shut.

"Something get in your eye?"

"No no- it's-" She gestured but didn't finish the thought. She chose to use a more intense vision, to catch any little details she could, but it was strenuous.

Billie finished for her, "Oh, you're looking at magic stuff. We can take a break for minute."

"Thanks."

He asked, "hey, how does that work exactly?"

"The eye's generate a special kind of breαth called pneuma. I push my circµlation through the eye to intensify it, then it touches things and signals back to me; kinda like a bat using echolocation. You know that

feeling of being watched? That's your brain subconsciously detecting pneuma touching you, which could just be from an animal or normal person, everyone does it passively."

"That's really cool," he said, "also kind of scary. We thought something was living in the crawl space last summer. I didn't find anything, but I felt weird the whole time I was down there."

"There's totally something in your crawl space."

They laughed at the horror of it.

She said, "why do you ask? Just curious?"

"Well, I was wondering if it was something I could learn, so I could see her for myself."

Lucile grew grim, "right. right. It takes a while to learn, let's keep working on this for now."

He began hanging up streamers along the wall. Lucile joined and started her next inquiry.

"So, you two met in school?"

"Yep, up in Fort Ross."

"How did that work, living in separate towns? How'd you end up here?"

"Mostly fine till we graduated. We just always planned around it, but then she wasn't coming into town on a daily basis. The summers were rough, till I got my own car and started driving out here. Then she started talking about me getting a job-"

"She wouldn't come to you?"

"Sure she would, but she always planned to live her life here, take over the family business.

Lucile watched him carefully, "So built your whole life around her?

"Pretty much."

"What about your parents?"

"I run errands for the orchard. I get to stop by anytime I'm up there. I go to spend time every now and then. I go around the holidays and sometimes to listen to baseball with my dad."

"Do you miss them?"

"Sure," he said in a nonchalant tone that didn't convince her, "is that strange?"

Her thoughts wondered off for a moment, "it seems like a lot to do for a person."

"That's life. And Marianne was worth it."

She took moment to focus on the decorations and to gather her thoughts. His breɑth shown no signs of the putridity she was looking for.

Along Lucile's wall the streamers were draped shallow, "I was worried we'd run out." On Billie's wall they went indulgently low, "I thought we had more." They finish the back wall together.

They conferred with Sherry, who was taking a break to ventilate the kitchen, preventing it from transforming into a sauna after the umpteenth load of boiling eggs. She sent them off to the back patio for one last request: cleaning the grill. It was a brick monstrosity made for serving parties; no one had volunteered to clean out the ash for a long time.

Billie removed the grates and gathered a trash can and shovel. He got to work.

"Should I spray these," asked Lucile, looking at all the gunk built up on the grates.

Billie shook his head, "it's a grill, fire and a wire brush will take care of it."

"Should I do anything?"

He said with enthusiasm, "I got it!"

Lucile pondered her next question. She asked him about his best memory of the deceased; He told another sickeningly wholesome story. She asked him about his worst memory; He had none. He was too busy shoveling to see her eyes roll.

"So, what kind of work did Marianne do here at the church?"

"Aside from events, she ran the weekly youth group. She was good with kids, it gave all the parents some time alone each week."

"How much did it pay?"

"Oh, it was all volunteer," Billie said with a clink of the shovel tapping in a pile of soot. He could just barely hear Lucile groan. "What'd you say?"

"Just thinking. What drove her? Why'd she care?"

"I don't know. Her parents are proud of their orchard, but I don't think they'd die for it. Marianne though: taking care of the trees, the business, the family dinners; going to church and helping out around town; making sure that everyone was doing good. She had a life she wanted to live here and she was fighting for it, I admired that about her."

Billie went back to work, trying to scrape out the congealed stain of char and grease at the bottom of the pit.

"And what about you," she asked, "you move from another town and start a new life. Your wife is rooted throughout the community, what's your place here?"

"Well, I got a job at the family orchard. I worked hard, spent time with her and her parents."

"What about your free time?"

"Listen to baseball games on the radio. Sometimes she'd get a group together and we'd come here to play softball."

"Do your friends play?"

"Well, it's her friends, their husbands, our coworkers. We do a Mexican horseshoe league in the summer. Sometimes I go fishing with Jeff. His wife told Marianne he needed someone to go with. Good guy."

"How about church?"

"I'd help if she asked me, we'd go on Sundays, obviously. I grew up going to different a church, had to get used to stuff here." Billie got down on his knees and tried his best to scrape with the corner of the shovel.

Lucile watched his breαth, she leaned forward and asked her question with intent, waiting for some kind of reaction. "Is there anyone from your childhood, your hometown, that you really miss? That you wish you could spend more time with?"

"Not really."

"Why?"

"I had Marianne."

Billie gave up, he just couldn't quite get the last of it. Lucile didn't have any more questions. He put the grill back together and stowed the tools. She used to hose to spray off his hands and rinse off the ashes from the patio.

Three of Wands

Every strand of jet-black hair on Ruby's head and every inch of her gorgeous skin funneled breαth into the apple held. The fruit's native æther had become a viscus swirl of red, continuing to grow in density and pressure while retaining its form. Under a blissful summer sun, all the students waited for their guest speaker, in the amphitheater of the Evenfang Preparatory School for Coven Unity. Ruby, seated near the bottom, was so focused she didn't notice the chatter stop.

All eyes were drawn to the guest descending the stairs. The trees ceased swaying to salute her presence. When she stopped, Ruby noticed the terrifying beauty that stood beside her. Mathilda Hanhep'paza, former Lady of the Black Hills Forest. Now retired and free. The teachers and students alike called her Grand Mother,

even though no such title existed; it was well deserved. The green flesh of her thighs slipped through the draping of her black dress, the bark of her abdomen accentuated her figure, and the way the branches and needles draped the cascading gray hair behind her was something to behold, complimented by the bristling needles sleeves. All crowned in a hat of the traditional style. And then there was her breɑth, that pulled from below in the earth ever towering up into the wiɳd. She was a vessel for the energy of the forest, old and wise with a sturdy sprucine vigor.

Ruby met Mathilda's gaze of deep unforgiving green. Her movements were gradual and deliberate. The Grand Mother of the Black Hills Forest took the student's apple in her hand, gently introducing her own breɑth.

"It's beautiful, but you've put too much pressure on it, child. It must be allowed to grow in its own way." In her palm the apple withed, and the wiɳd within congealed around the seed, ready to birth a fresh stalk.

Ruby accepted it back and said, "I'll learn from your example." She listened well to the elder's lesson, but all throughout her frown grew deeper at the site of her ruined experiment. The apple would rot and the seeds would grow lushly.

And then she woke up.

Ruby's eyes opened to the same view she'd seen for nearly ten years: sky filtered through the leaves of her Tree of Murmurs. She tried to adjust herself, but the entanglement of root-flesh and leg-wood prevented anything significant. Beneath her neck smaller roots tugged at white hair, what little of it was left. She gave up and settle back on her pillow, suddenly very aware of her heavy breathing.

She felt the sensation of being watched. Donna sat in the corner of yard. In her hands was Ruby's old hat; at this moment the girl was maintaining her sight as she was instructed. Ruby sighed.

"Do you like it, child?"

The girl nodded, "it's very pointy."

"I was always a fan of the traditional style, come here, let me see it on you."

Donna sat next to her and put on the massive black hat, the cone sunk down to her nose.

"It fits you perfectly."

"No, it doesn't," she said tipping it upwards.

"Who will you be? What will you do when you're older?" The girl had no answer. Ruby filled the silence, "when I was your age, I wanted to be the 'great American witch.'"

"What's that?"

"A silly idea born from a desire for prestige. A maker of magics wholly unique to the new world, to set us apart from traditions of Europe's past. But America is vast and diverse, and the wiɳd flow through us all. There were many great witches. Really, being recognized is just about reputation."

"Who? Who were the great witches I mean," asked Donna.

"Oh, I wish I had managed to get you girls copies of the histories. Let's see. There were the Ravenwood, a great European coven whose birds connected the witches of the Black Century. Some of them came here, to the new world. There was the Witch of Ice, who signed the Treaty of Salem. And the Evenfangs that made pacts with the wolves and explored the frontier. Or the Teslove who tamed the lightning. But if there are any who stand above the rest, it's the three immortals of the old world."

"What's immortal mean?"

"It means that something does not die. They are greatest of us, because they have the most time to do great things."

"I don't think they're that great," interjected Dorothy, slipping off her sandals at the door and sitting beside them. "The immortals haven't solved the world's problems, even with all the time they've had. Sometimes I wonder if there are just stories made up to scare us into studying more. But I do know a great

witch, one that struck out on her own. Who built a town with nothing but grit and love. Who developed her own magic and gave orphans a coven of their own."

"It was nothing," said Ruby.

"It was everything."

Ruby refocused, "What progress have you made?"

Dorothy gave her report. "Our visitor, the fortune teller, was attacked, but couldn't tell me anything else. I've been thinking of enlisting her help for pay, but she's also been up to trouble."

Ruby was annoyed. "And what good would a fortune teller do? True seers go mad under the weight of time, even as their visions come true. Magic that powerful comes a price. The fate readers dabble in a fickle field that would just as soon change as show anything of value."

"I know. I thought she might act as an extra pair of hands, and bait."

"Hmph. What else have you been doing?"

"I found no other trace, so I'm making reactive charms to place in that area. I'm learning a spell of revealing sight, I'll start hunting with that soon."

"Seeking through my domain would be quicker," said Ruby.

"I know, but with your condition I don't want to risk it, hurting you or destabilizing the town."

"You'll need to join the domain to inherit it anyways. Are you saying I didn't teach well enough?"

"No, of course not."

"I want this thing found." When Ruby didn't receive an immediate response, she emphasized, "you just said someone was attacked.

Dorothy relented. "Understood. We'll have to prepare. Should we plan for after Easter?"

"You're a witch, not a nun, Dorothy."

The heir took in the statement, her hand reflexively touching the crucifix hidden under her shirt. The Steward merely waited for her to agree.

Dorothy exhaled her doubts away. "We'll prepare tonight and do the ritual in the morning. Come with me, Donna. I need your help." They entered the kitchen and shut the door.

Donna asked, "can we still go tomorrow?"

"Of course. Your sister will take you. I just need your help for tonight. I'm going on an errand, tell Becky to be ready to work when I get back."

The little one seemed satisfied, Dorothy was not. She left to check one last thing.

Seven of Rings -reversed

Lucile stroked her arm in discomfort as they went back inside. The dying flesh was beginning to harden. It would darken, till the skin and fat would dry and crack, and then begin to fall off. The body wouldn't recognize the injury until blood seeped from tears in the lower dermis, that is if she was lucky enough for it not to reach the muscle. She prayed the nerves would die, but even the neighboring nerves would be enough to plague her with a dull tingling pain for weeks.

"I need to stop by a pharmacy today," she thought aloud, but disappointed to find Billie didn't hear. She silently cursed herself. The morning was gone along with the hope of making quick progress. She stopped him before they reached the kitchen, "You're trying right?"

It took him a moment to respond, but when he did it was with conviction. "Of course I'm trying. I want this more than you do."

Sherry popped out, "how'd it go?"

"Not perfect but pretty clean," he said proudly.

"Well, that's some good news. Lucile! Guess who just called. My friend Dorothy, she was looking for you around town. She'll be here in just a moment, I don't know what she-"

"What?!" Lucile was alarmed, and the others confused.

The ensuing clarifications offered her no exit, nor could she force it. Then she felt Dorothy's gaze illuminate through the doorway like the hot sun through parted clouds. The witch only broke focus on realizing the presence of the others in the kitchen.

First she looked at Billie, "wait, are you together-" Then she looked at Sherry, "you said they got into a fight."

"Oh, that was all just a big misunderstanding," beamed Sherry.

While she smoothed things over and Billie said hello, Lucile stepped back. It was instinctual, nearly hiding in the hallway, but she didn't run, she knew she couldn't. Perhaps things were fine, they could talk outside.

To her horror, Dorothy began right there in front of the others. "Do you remember that racoon I told you about?"

Billie chuckled, "it might be in my crawlspace."

Lucile quickly spoke up, "yes! yes. what about it?"

Dorothy spoke in a commanding tone that didn't match her words. "My mother is very concerned about it and wants me to take drastic measures. I thought I'd ask you about the racoon one more time. Can you tell me anything else? Anything at all. Please."

The others had picked up on the mood shift. Sherry leaned back and waited.

Billie interjected to Lucile, "what's this about a raccoon? You didn't mention anything."

She juggled the two of them, struggling to navigate her thoughts, let alone deciding what to say. She fidgeted unconsciously and her hand found the deck box affixed to her belt. "I could read your fortune, we just set up tables over-"

Dorothy's expression soured, and she looked to ceiling to compose herself. "No, that's fine," she said, more disappointed than anything else. She began to bid Sherry farewell, "I won't make it tomorrow, you'll watch the girls, won't you?"

Lucile had an opportunity. She could speak up. She could offer to follow the witch outside to privacy. She could even insist on that reading. She did none of these things; she let Dorothy leave. Maybe she was just a little stunned, maybe she was relieved, perhaps it was pure spite, perhaps she was glad she got away with it.

"Well you two," Sherry said, "that's all the work I have for you. Just one more thing to talk about. Bill,"

"Yes," he straightened up.

"Mrs. Law and I were talking the other night, she would really like it if you came tomorrow.

"I just don't know if I'm ready," he turned to Lucile looking for an out, "were we going to do something tomorrow?"

Sherry said, "she can come. Everyone is welcome here."

Lucile considered. "Let me think about it."

With that they left, with most of the day ahead of them.

"What was that about the raccoon," Billie asked as they drove away.

"I met her the other day and she told me something personal."

"Then why'd you look so uncomfortable?"

She couldn't say, and he seemed to ease off, perhaps understanding her desire for silence or maybe just feeling better having expressed his thoughts.

They had lunch at Crawford's dinner, most of the conversation provided by Lucile gushing about the adorable gnome aesthetic. It brightened both their moods a little. Billie hadn't much to say, he listened in to the radio when Lucile and the waitress began to chat, both of whom were adept at making small talk with customers. Gradually he began to wonder if they had entered into a feedback loop, and if he would be trapped, waiting for all time. Luckily the cafe had other customers.

Afterwards they walk to get Lucile some ointment and bandages to cover her burn.

"Are you going to be okay," he asked.

"It's not the first time," she said, "just the worst. It's this spot on my neck I'm worried about."

"I hope it doesn't scar."

"Me too." She finished with the ointment, "let's get back to work."

The rest of the day was uneventful. Walking through the neighborhood, they passed his house, and the park, and many mismatched homes had been put up individually over the years. All the while She interrogated him with questions of memory and emotion. Of times happy, sad, surprising, and what she watched most carefully: anger. "Walk me through it," she said. "Step by step, what about it pissed you off?" And then she watched, eyes wide and aching. But memories understood are not the same as memories felt, and answers provided are not the same and answers given.

After a long while, as she rested her eyes, Billie asked, "is this working?"

"I just need a little more time," she said sweetly, and neither of them believed it.

"Listen, I've been wondering. Where did you learn this stuff?"

Lucile was slow to answer. There were things she didn't want to say and things she couldn't for both their sakes. "Do you ever hear about those conspiracy stories? Weird things happening, reasons why the highways and forests are so heavily controlled by the government, people getting abducted by aliens?"

"You did not learn magic from aliens."

"Maybe I am an alien," Lucile grinned. "No, I was raised by witches. I left to live my own life though."

"Witches?"

"They take care of magical problems for the government. It's the kind of thing they think people are better off not knowing."

Billie said, "I think I'd rather know the truth. Living with a lie just hurts more when the truth catches up."

"Yeah, you're probably right," she said solemnly. "Oh! Ah, don't go telling anyone, alright?"

"I don't think telling people about ghosts and witches would do me any good," he said.

She seemed relieved that he didn't press more questions, maybe he was more concerned with the task at hand. After a little more meandering, it was certain to her they would accomplish nothing that day. She declared, "I think we need to go tomorrow, I need to see you interacting with other people, if we're going to make progress."

"Okay."

That was all he said. She continued to check his breαth, and noted a stagnant stench seemed come over him, but nothing she could really use. She elected to walk home, and they parted ways.

Lucile spent the rest of the day at her table, shuffling. Anxious Shuffling. The fortune teller, reader of the web of shifting decisions both past and future, had no answers to many questions of her own. How could she help him? What were the witches planning? How had she even managed to come this far? What could she try? Growing louder than all the other questions, until it was the only one that remained, "what am I doing?"

The buses wouldn't run till Monday. She had all of tonight to think of a plan.

Five of Swords

In solitude, Billie unfolded the note in his pocket.

You asked me to write a poem, I have not in a long time.
You asked me to write you a poem, maybe one with a rhyme.
I swore I'd never write poems, but you know my love is true.
You asked me to write a poem, not just any poem will do.

You are
Beautiful,
That can't be denied.
From the gold of your hair to
Your sapphire eyes, all surrounded by apples,
Gracing the warm August sky. But that's not the reason
I love you, (well maybe it is, just a bit). The feel of your breasts and
The smell of your hair and the sultry sway in your hips. But that's not the reason
I love you, the beauty that could launch ships. No! It's all that passion, and how you tend to the trees.
The sweat of your brow, green of your thumb, and so very tender words on your lips.
The way you shovel manure, full of gusto and grit. God! how madly
I love you, even standing near shit. It is the smell
Of the fritters, even the time you burned it.
I dread to disappoint you,
Even with temper so mild.

It's your hum when no one's there,
It's not in dark when we're wild.
It's the sight of you praying,
And god! is it when you smile.
When together we're laughing,

That is when I want a child.

His voice was seizing, a couple tears forced themselves free. "I hoped you'd like it, but its a little gimmicky." No one and no Thing comforted him.

Not long after he received a phone call. In a sugary sweet voice, Mrs. Law said, "Hello Billie. How are you?"

"I'm alright."

"That's good to hear. We were wondering if you'd like to come over tonight for Easter dinner; we've had something come up tomorrow night."

He choose to say, "that's alright, we can just cancel Easter dinner. Thank you for letting me know."

"Oh, okay then."

A couple awkward conversation ending exchanges were made, and he was left to his thoughts.

Three of Rings

Dorothy returned to the patchwork house and the Everseed Coven began their preparations. She had concerns about this plan, but it was her teacher, mother, and master's wish. "We do what we must," she sighed before giving Becky and Donna directions. They would be hastily integrating the heir apprentice into the domain, such that she might wield it as the aging Steward could no longer.

Creating a domain is no easy task. Breαth is malleable but circμlation is pungent, and the wiɳd is chaos. A domain had to be slowly forged, gradually woven, outwardly grown into an extension of the self. It was possibly the most operation critical technique of the Grand Old Coven. With presence over and entire town a Steward might sway the wiɳd, diffuse insidious whispɛrs, and monitor for all that lived beyond the dark.

Ruby Everseed's age and all she'd given to her tree were too much. The cost of maintaining her domain outweighed the power she could leverage from it. Dorothy would now join share her master's vein. But such things shouldn't be rushed. A well-established coven would have the benefit of various enchanted tools and multiple capable apprentices. They would have to make do with skill and gumption.

Donna, bless her heart, was not able to assist in the magical preparations. Nor did they have any time to teach her as they went. She watched carefully and had just enough knowledge to become even more confused. She was a help, however; an extra pair of hands makes a world of difference. She fetched items and cleared messes away, and spent time caring for Ruby, who needed to conserve all strength for the ritual.

Becky was tasked with much of the rudimentary alchemy, denaturing her breαth and channeling it into the ingredients to activate hidden properties. If she made a mistake, the whole brew would be ruined. Fiercely driven prove herself, even with a little supervision she contributed greatly.

Becky insisted she could handle it, but more than once she barked at her little sister. And later on in the night Dorothy worriedly intervened. The girl had poured so much of her own energy into the ingredients that after hours of working she grew delirious and nearly let everything burn. Donna took over stirring the big pot after that.

Of course, it was Dorothy that bore greatest burden on her shoulders and in her unseen hands. The girls, for all their effort, still marveled to see Dorothy working around the kitchen, all four of her hands working in conjunction, her human arms and the wraith flesh that had once hindered her. Tools and ingredients passed from palm to palm to nothing but air, waiting there until needed. Becky would bring an item as requested and suddenly feel a force lift it away from her, while Dorothy was otherwise occupied.

There were three concoctions they needed. First was a stimulant for breαth production. Second was a stimulant to keep Ruby lucid. Dorothy would do everything she could during the ritual to alleviate any pressure

placed on her, but to do in minutes what should be done in weeks would take both their effort. Thusly the third recipe was to further bolster the elder's health once this was over.

Eventually they took a little time to eat, although Dorothy had to keep an eye on the pots. For the rest of the evening they had to stir and reduce the concoctions. Donna reached her limit and went to bed. Becky cleaned things up, but the final steps wouldn't be till late in the night.

"I can stay up and help," she said.

"No, go get ready for bed. Easter's tomorrow," said Dorothy.

"I'm too old for Easter."

"But your sister's not, and she needs you to take her."

"You don't want my help," Becky said, almost terrified.

"I want you to wake up and clean some of these dishes, then go have fun." Dorothy said more authoritatively than she intended, but the girl accepted it and went to bed.

All that was left now was to wait, stir periodically, and add the final ingredients. Dorothy passed the time by making a little focal charm for whatever advantage she could eek out. And then around midnight she set an alarm for two hours, it proved unnecessary. She woke on her own, her hands trembling in the cold. She checked the simmering brews and stirred, then went back to sleep to repeat the process till morning.

Continued

Dorothy woke in a haze and slowly checked everything. It was ready. Then she flopped back onto the couch, she'd need all the rest she could get. It was the sound of the girls rummaging for breakfast that finally got her up. She ate and went to see to Ruby's care but found that Becky had taken it upon herself.

Then the time came to send them off, "find Sherry and let her know you're there, okay?" Having them go alone was regrettable, but it was better than having them here in case the worst were to happen.

There was nothing left she could prepare, not in such short time. She stood at the door to the courtyard with all the supplies waiting there in some vain hope that Ruby would just let this pass. Then she was called upon and there was nothing left to do but the work. She wasted no more time. First was a circle of stabilizer candles, then the focusing charm between them, finally she laid out her potions. She gave Ruby the stimulant, and the old witch's red eyes blazed. She sat up as much as she could.

"Where are the girls?"

"They went to the Easter egg hunt."

Ruby scoffed, "they don't need to go to church."

"Less noise in the house will help me focus."

"Mmm," Ruby agreed and discarded her blanket.

Dorothy went to the edge of the courtyard and undressed, quietly slipping off her crucifix and placing it beneath her shirt. She sat beside her mother, "are you sure?"

"Have you practiced?"

"Yes."

Ruby took the breɑth stimulant and downed her share, then handed over the rest.

Dorothy followed. The concoction was foul in a tolerable way, medicinal. It would take effect in the coming minutes. She closed her eyes, she wouldn't insult her master's skill or experience with further worry, nor could she; this would take all her focus.

She brought every corner of the body to mind. Circɥlation billowing beneath the skin, fervently within the lungs, where she mingled with the wiɳd most intimately. Every inch, every millimeter of skin and hair radiated into the world. Then she pushed and pulled, bringing her breɑth to match the mighty flow of within.

Once everything was controlled and bubbled around her as much as she could manage, She channeled things forward to her hands. Within her unseen palms she condensed and pressurized, then twiddled out the threads. In her left hand she twisted and gathered it around her fingers, and in her right she wove it outward in a sturdy chain. The process was slow, each physical move of her twenty fingers carefully complimented with magical influence to keep the breɑth pure and stable, to make an umbilical from the circɥlation within to the network without.

Ruby pulled her domain away to give her apprentice room to work, lest the two structures collide. Dorothy's eyes were closed, for any visual distraction would have sent her astray, and when it came time to extend her fledgling strand of domain outward, she was grateful for her foresight in making the focal charm. The way the wiɳd bent around it let her reach out by feel and proprioception.

This was the critical moment. For the last hour Dorothy have woven in the dark, and now she reached out to find her mother's embrace. Doubts fluttered into her mind and fatigue suddenly weighed on her. She opened her eyes the tinniest amount and all her questions were dispelled as they found Ruby's brilliant gaze. Around the charm their threads met and opened to one another. A jolt rocked through her, and all her work nearly evaporated. But the domain swaddled around her fleeting strands, gently lulling them still and stable.

Dorothy swelled with pride and relief; in the hands of her master she had nothing to fear. But then she was flooded with new sensations, the wiɳd around her no longer felt distinct, but like a numb distant part of herself. There was no time to waste. She had to continue the process, putting more and more into the connection. Her senses continued to spread, she could feel both Ruby and the Tree. The horrid corpseflush bark and arboreal bones and overripe flesh, a keystone inside which the domain was secured: That was Ruby. There was more life in the air then in the woman entwined with the earth. The Tree beat like a heart, it's warmth and wiɳd stood with deliberate purpose, vibrantly growing and sealing the grafted fruits. Ruby had poured so much of herself into the Tree of Murmurs, too much.

A rumble nearly tore them apart.

"Steel yourself," responded Ruby with a growling rasp. "Begin the search."

"Shouldn't we build more connection first?"

"You have enough to do your job. The rest can wait."

Turning her mind back to work, Dorothy was pleasantly surprised. The more she circɥlated into the domain, the more she called out into its vast fibers, the easier it echoed back to her. She stretched under the streets and over the trees, beyond the walls of their home and across the town. It was horribly disorienting, but then she found a person, like a little candle of breɑth in the dark beside her. It was a grumpy old man who stayed home from the festivities just a couple houses over. That was enough for her to get a sense of space. Now she would seek, through the whole town she would move and flush out this sinister errant soɥnd.

Where to look first, what strategy to employ? She would check on Becky and Donna, on the church and townspeople. It couldn't hurt to start there. She found them, hundreds of little lights gathered together, and she couldn't help but wonder at it all. She began to recognize some of them. She found Becky, very clearly standing out amongst the crowd. The aspirant must have noticed the probing within the domain, as her breɑth throbbed out in response. On the other hand, Donna had let her guard down again, but it was Easter, maybe it was okay to let her play. Dorothy knew she couldn't waste time, so she began to sweep through and move on, pondering how

long this search would take. But by chance, or by some horrible fate, just feet and yards away from the girls she found something. And God, it was awful.

It was unlike anyone, anything else there. It was muted, with only traces of bitter putrescence fraying out upon her touch, but so pungent was the soμnd there was no mistaking it, like the rancid song of a thousand flies above a corpse. The people didn't notice, but the whispɛrs spread away and the groѡlss held their distance.

"Can you feel what I'm feeling," asked Dorothy.

Ruby reached out and clasped her knee, "yes! That's it. Go fetch it!"

Even just the thought of leaving created a trembling between them. Dorothy's connection was neither secure nor stable. She felt the world warping around her, like the swaying of ship. "I couldn't, I need to-"

"Go! I'll hold it all together, just nurture it in the back of your mind." Ruby stared into her apprentice's eyes and saw only her daughter's fear. She said, "I'll be fine."

It took Dorothy minutes to dress herself, unbalanced and juggling control of her connection at the same time. She stepped outside, wiping the sweat away from her eyes and donning her crucifix. Time for church.

V - The Hierophant

In the morning Billie could hear families in the neighborhood getting ready, the neighborhood full of the children's chittering squeals. He took some deep breaths. Waiting outside the motel he saw no sign of the fortune teller and realized they hadn't discussed their plans. He knocked on her door, she was surprised to see him.

"No, I figured you might come," she said, "I just don't have anything to wear."

"What's wrong with what you've got on?"

"It's not really formal, but it's the best I've got." She wore jeans and a teal blouse. She spread her arms as if to ask, “what do you think?'

"You look fine," he said as positive as he could, but his attention was split on her bandage wrapped right arm.

She deflated, "I look shabby."

"That's an injury, it's not your fault," he said. "I think you look good, it's Easter, people will be having fun."

"This isn't going to be to church-y then?"

"There's a service, but then it's mostly a party."

She seemed to cringe at the idea, before taking a deep breath and sighing, "I'm there to watch you. It'll be okay."

She quickly finished up and they drove off.

"And how are you feeling," she asked.

"I'm fine."

"I didn't push you too hard yesterday, did I?"

Billie's words didn't match his expression, "I'm alright. I just needed to recoup."

"Okay, we're going to make progress, something is going to happen today, I can feel it."

"The cards tell you that?"

"Nope, I just have a hunch!" Her positivity didn't match her expression either, fidgeting the whole ride over. "Am I going to be weird just standing next to you all day?"

"It's mostly going to be boring. Just listen to the pastor and make small talk. You know, it's not too late to quit. Maybe we could go do one of your ritual thingies instead."

"No, we should do this. It'll be good. And what about you? You're still wanting to get out of it?"

"No, no, Marianne would want me to be here; talk to the folks for a bit, maybe play some Mexican horseshoes. It's gonna be good."

They began inward to the Easter Sunday service.

The church was packed inside and out. In the back were spots of blankets and umbrellas. A parade of people were dropping off potluck contributions in the kitchen. Families with younger children were painting eggs. They squeezed through and quietly snuck into the back of the nave, or at least they tried as all the children's laughter spilled through the door with them. The pastor was undisturbed but some of the back rows glanced over, among them: Mr. & Mrs. Law.

It was a brief interaction, Billie and his father-in-law made eye contact, Lucile followed his eyes. He smiled a hello, Mr. Law flashed a scowl of confusion, perhaps disapproval, before firmly placing his attention on the pulpit. Neither of them knew exactly what to make of it and would have to wait until afterward to find out. They decided to just stand in the back.

However, they weren't the only ones coming in late. Another pair that Lucile couldn't have anticipated arrived just then, and when the door opened again the sound was accompanied by the sensation of a witch's glare that gave Lucile goosebumps. She looked over to find two girls. The elder surveyed the room, looking for someone, before escorting her younger sister to paint eggs.

Thankfully Billie wasn't showing any abnormalities at the moment; they remained undetected. But a feeling had stirred in Lucile's mind, perhaps curiosity or maybe paranoia. She quietly gestured to Billie that she would be right back and left the room. He thought nothing of it, most likely a restroom break.

Continued

Lucile peaked out from the women's restroom, eyeing the coven girls. They were settling down to paint eggs like all the other kids. She crept towards the edge of the room. The younger didn't seem to be an issue, completely devoted to her fun. The older one was perhaps uninterested or maybe vaguely anxious. The question was: how observant was she? Lucile should have just returned to the service, but a trap of her own worries had already sprung.

Sherry appeared and spoke with the sisters, and then promptly waved to Lucile, who immediately felt the older sister's gaze. She was left with no choice but to greet her with a magician's handshake. The girl was surprised but nodded. Then she returned to watching over her little sister and began work on an egg herself. Lucile was beckoned by Sherry into the kitchen.

She crossed through the room, surrounded by strange people guarding their young. She desperately hoped to avoid eye contact. She slipped into the kitchen behind Sherry, who was busy managing all the food.

"I thought you'd be here with Bill."

"Oh, he's still in the presentation, I just-"

"It's weird attending a different church isn't it, I remember he had trouble when he first came with Marianne. Well, listen, if you feel uncomfortable at all, you can just come hide out here with me."

And Lucile did, hiding out and helping out, intending to do so for just a bit, but time got away from her. Parents popped into the kitchen looking for paper towels and Sherry would introduce her, falling into small talk

for a few minutes, most of which revolved around her injured right arm. Just as it seemed she would be able to make a break for it the sermon finished. The halls turned to chaos.

Lucile was enlisted to help with the transition, afterward finding her path back was blocked. They had begun to take things out the kitchen's exit to the picnic tables, many people filled the yard in groups conversing and lounging. She thought Billie might make his way outside, or otherwise she might circumnavigate the event hall, but again she was ensnared into an conversation.

It was a simple and curious, "who are you," that coiled around her.

She turned to meet the leering many eyes a gossiping hydra. She would later learn the names of each head: Jane, Janean, and Janice who had spoken. Lucile was all alone and had nowhere to go in this field of casually mingling people. Her hand bumped into her deck box and so she answered with a flourish. "I am Madam Delphina, traveling fortune teller, but you can call me Lucile. Pleased to meet you."

"What brings you here today?"

"I was invited-"

"Oh, of course." The women looked her up and down. They each wore modest dresses and decorative pastel jackets, perfect for the occasion.

Lucile changed tactics "Your outfits are all so cute, I wish I had something better to wear today."

"I imagine there's not much room in suitcase for formal wear," said Janice with smile. From every angle the monster's horrid gleaming white teeth and studious eyes were bearing down.

Lucile looked for a moment to pull away, but she couldn't find it. The women gnawed at her with question after question of her lifestyle and work and the injury on her arm, savoring and judging each answer she offered. Until she saw a familiar face and called to break up the conversation. "Lizzy!" she said with a wave. This would prove to be a mistake.

The girl was happy enough to see her, waving back. But her mother was not. Mrs. Crawford was pulling her daughter along, eyes shifting back and forth, ready at a moment to rush the poor girl away from anyone who might try and speak of a certain piece of news that that had clearly already swept through the entire town. Each head of the hydra wore a knowing smile and excitedly gnashed a hello at them as well. Mrs. Crawford begrudgingly indulged them with small talk. She glared at Lucile, who had realized what she'd done. When the greetings ended Lucile chose to stay.

The women first gave their attention to Mrs. Crawford, prodding to see if she'd crack, but when that failed they turned toward the girl, and with each bite the she shrunk more and more.

"What are you, sixteen? You've grown up so fast."

"Such a beautiful young lady, you're practically glowing."

"Are there any boys you're interested in, you are at that age."

And Then Mrs. Crawford spoke, "and what do you mean by that. Should she be interested in boys?"

Lizzy pawed at her mother's sleeve, her fearful eyes were firmly locked on her own mom.

And then just to top it all off, Sherry had seen what was happening while setting out a tablecloth. She sprinted across the lawn and popped into the group. She tactfully chose her words but delivered them too greedily, "Hello! So how are things going?"

She was met with Mrs. Crawford's death glare.

Lucile shook her head, giving Lizzy the bad news in her most comforting tone, "rumors travel fast."

"Oh, we're not trying to pry," protested Janice.

"You sure you weren't?"

"Well, I mean, we just want to help," and the others chimed in with, "That's right," and "I have crib in storage if you need."

"That won't be necessary," said Mrs. Crawford

"Yes it will," blurted Lizzy.

Between the two of them was a long yet unspoken conversation, one they'd already had and repeated in sparse fragments, each piece was sharp enough to cut.

"A topic for another day," said Lucile, to the relief of everyone else. She tried to end it there, "good luck tomorrow, okay?"

But Mrs. Crawford barked back, "and what does that mean?"

Each member of the circle shifted in awkward silence, the hostility was reaching a boiling point.

Except for Lizzy. "Mom, I'm going to tell him tomorrow."

"No, you are not."

"I will." In just two words the girl's voice managed to shake. She was headstrong, and it was no wonder where she got it from. "I decided I would, we talked about it," she said with look to Lucile.

"Who is ‘we?’ Who are you? What have you been saying to my daughter?" Mrs. Crawford spoke with an outstretched talon.

To Lucile's surprise, Janice came to her aid, introducing her along with endorsements from the others. But it wasn't enough.

"Some bum swindling people with nonsense-" Mrs. Crawford cut herself off before she could add more indecent words.

"She's not a bum," muttered Lizzy, having expended what all her bravado.

But that was enough for Lucile to say, "that's right, I am not a bum, I'm a hobo. Second, I don't swindle anyone, I live on tips. Finally, your daughter made her own decision. I just listened."

"Oh, I'm sure you did. Think you know better than her own mother? What would you do then, getting pregnant at sixteen?"

"I'd abort it," she responded, somberly.

Mrs. Crawford looked smugly surprised, and Lizzy betrayed, scared.

But Lucile wasn't finished. "I couldn't take care of a baby; I can barely take care of myself. But I wasn't raised in a place like this." All around were the townsfolk of Atomic Springs, joyously lounging about the church. "I didn't have a mother that wanted me, or a father at all. But she obviously has a mother that cares about her very much."

After a stiff silence, Mrs. Crawford relented, "you're going to tell him tomorrow?"

Lizzy nodded her head.

"We'll talk about this later," the mother sighed.

There was nothing left to be said or done, just stew in concern.

XI - Justice

Billie was at peace, strangely. Standing in the back of the main hall he could take in the serenity of the whole flock contemplating the sermon, at least momentarily when it wasn't interrupted by stirring and shifting and that one guy unwrapping a stick of gum. Mr. Law shot him a glance with a disquieting expression. They were certainly going to speak, and he found himself conflicted about Lucile's return.

The service finished, and Billie approached the in-laws. Mrs. Law was in no mood for conversation, however. She was terribly emotional, her cheeks flushed, and her greeting filled with that certain selfless warmth that in truth was more for her than him. Mr. Law suggested she wait for him, and she agreed, leaving

for the car. Easter without her only daughter proved to be a challenge. Mr. Law, for his part, no doubt felt similar, only relieved of the emotional burden by his wife taking it onto herself. In exchange he took the burden of speaking with their son-in-law.

"I didn't think you would be here," said Mr. Law.

"I'm trying to make some changes, get back in touch with people, I guess."

"But you couldn't do dinner last night?" They held eye contact for a long time. Billie had no response. Finally Mr. Law took a deep breath and sighed, "today's been hard on her. We're not going to stay."

"Is there anything I can do," said Billie, but his opportunity for that had already passed.

"No," Mr. Law pushed passed it, "who's the girl you're with?"

"The fortune teller that's visiting town. She's been- she's been helpful."

Instead of questions to be asked and answers Mr. Law didn't want to hear, there was silence. Billie knew now that something had grown between them. There was a static in the air.

Mr. Law continued on, not so much to make a point, but with a tone near exhaustion, simply wanting to deliver the news. "The reason we canceled Easter dinner, is that we're driving up to Fort Ross to look at my cousin's RV. We're thinking about travelling the country. Go see all the states."

Billie was shocked, "what about the farm?"

"We're selling it to either Gatlin or Sean."

"But why? what-"

"We thought about just a vacation at first, but we started to think we didn't have a reason to come back." After a moment, he continued with a sigh, "I wish you'd came to dinner. Do you care who we sell it to?"

"Sean knows more about how we run things-" Billie trailed off, thinking about the orchard he loved, that his Marianne loved, and a sharp instinct wondered why he hadn't been offered the purchase, but maybe he already knew.

"True," said Mr. Law, "but Gatlin would still keep the industry alive for the town as a whole. I'll let Sean know you said that. He thinks you hate him."

Billie couldn't restrain his thoughts, "what about me?"

"You don't care about the farm, not enough."

The answer sickened him, but it was the answer he asked for. Mr. Law said goodbye and left, the last of the congregation had moved outside, eager to have fun. Billie was alone in the hall and kept company by the electric frustration and festering resentment stirring inside him. He just stood there, unable to move.

Continued

She should have broken away sooner, but Lucile couldn't bring herself to jeopardize the meager goodwill she'd fostered. She knew Billie was waiting somewhere for her, but surely he was having a good time. That was until Dorothy arrived. Storming up the church yard with a grave look on her face, the witch surveilled the people. Lucile startled at her sight, before a more unsettling presence washed over her. Dorothy was polite but terse, asking Sherry about the girls. She left to find them, but not before giving Lucile a look of instruction. Lucile could no longer dally. She followed behind, but not to help. While the coven conversed, She skittered passed and returned to the main hall to find Billie. She had to grab him and take him away from scrutiny.

"Hey there, sorry I-" Lucile stopped herself, as his expression was twisted. She looked again and saw his breαth was vile. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"They can't just leave me like that," he muttered to himself. He seemed lost in some distant dream until he heard her voice and clutched the side of head.

She said, "okay, hey just take a deep breath. Let's go outside." She pointed them towards the emergency exit.

But he stopped and said, "when are you going to let me talk to her?"

It was too late to late to placate him, too late to escape. She felt the witch's burning eyes find them both. Even now, she thought perhaps she could make an excuse, but that too was taken away when Billie spoke again.

"I can't live without her. I need to talk to Marianne."

Dorothy approached him with clinical dread, "how are you going to do that, Bill?"

He twitched with pain.

The girls came and shut doors, Becky snuck passed, her eyes locked on man, giving him space like a wild animal. She checked the exit and called back, "there's people outside."

Again, Dorothy asked, "how are you going to do that," but looked squarely at Lucile with contempt and a growing anger. "What have you told him?"

Lucile was petrified.

"Billie, what has she told you." Dorothy placed a hand on his shoulder, "I'm going to help you. I promise. We're going to pull that thing out of you."

"No," he said, "no I want to talk to her first. Wait, Dorothy?" There was some break in his delirium, just enough to look at Lucile and incriminate her further. "How does she know about this?"

The fortune teller was beginning to back away, maybe in fear. Thoughts of running away flashed into her mind, but she made no choice.

Then Dorothy took a step toward her, it was without any other action, or so it seemed, but then she felt an unseen hand grip the back of her neck and pull her closer. "Tell him the truth. Tell him now."

It was over, and Lucile finally said, "Billie, there is no such thing as ghosts. Marianne is gone, and the eϛho inside you is just wearing her face. I had to explain it so-"

But her excuses were entirely unheard.

"What!?" Billie roared, before a great seizure doubled him over, hugging his ribs for dear life. Mαrianne emerged kissing his cheek. Its skeletal frame creaking inside a tight sundress, that swelled upward to heaving oily black cleavage. Its porcelain skin and ivory teeth held back a caustic stench. The smile on it's plump lips didn't match the rancid anger in its eyes.

Mαrianne grabbed for Lucile, who foolishly raised her right hand to defend herself, and a crackling jolt forced all her fingers to freeze in stinging pain. But then she was pushed back suddenly, saved from the eϛho's wrath. Dorothy stepped between them, meeting the thing with her own hands wreathed in protective breαth. However, It danced aside as Billie shoved passed the witch and grabbed Lucile by the arm.

"What do you mean ghosts aren't real? What have I been talking to you about then, talking about her and me and- Why would you lie?"

Lucile had no answer, but Dorothy did: force. He was pulled back by a wraith hand around his neck whose touch tingled and stung. He tried to grab and yank free but found that nothing was there. She pulled the two of them apart and commanded him to calm down. He threw himself away from her grip and nearly fell over the pews. Mαrianne lovingly stroked his back. Like that they waited, and soon he stood back up, breathing heavily and staring at the floor. The thing was gone.

Dorothy said, "Bill, I want you to come with me. I'll get you sorted out, okay?"

Voices began to murmur behind the door as people came to check what happened. They left out the exit, providing the people in the yard with a strange parade of Easter day drama. Becky was assigned to monitor Billie, while Dorothy held Lucile's arm and dragged her along, even as she offered no resistance. The outsider would soon face the Steward of Atomic Springs.

XX - Judgement

It was only ten minutes. Becky stood against the wall across from a sullen Billie with his head in his hands. At first he was trying to cover himself, gain some small piece of privacy, but now his shoulders were slack, like he was completely ready to collapse and the only thing holding him up was his elbows dug into his knees. Donna was left to watch Lucile, standing just inside the door, while Dorothy went into the courtyard to handle Ruby's care, she wouldn't let the outsider leave line of sight. The little one wasn't very happy with the silence and so got everyone a glass of water. But the sorrowful man wouldn't, maybe couldn't, take his. Lucile found it hard to drink hers, perhaps it was the odor of alchemy permeating the kitchen that filled her with dread. They waited for ten minutes, and it was sickening.

"My god, he's really alive," Ruby exclaimed in a soft rasp. "To have an ęcho leeching off you, it must be immaculately stable. For it to move through you without burning you to a crisp, I can hardly believe it."

Billie nearly smacked his head on a branch of a rather massive apple tree. Were he not so distraught he might have felt wonder at this strange place secretly fashioned inside the locally famous Marsh House. Then he glimpsed the woman under the tree, stark naked and looking through him with unnatural red eyes, skin withering and traced with green veins. He locked his eyes to the ground and crouched to avoid any more branches. Dorothy escorted Lucile in past him. It seemed as if she was shoved to ground, but he didn't see Dorothy touch her.

"To lose your wife and now this, poor boy. But, before we handle that," Ruby turned her attention. "Name."

"Lucile Delphina Rodgers."

"Who taught you?"

"Lady Morgana at the Evenfang Preparatory-"

"Joan!?" Ruby's face lit up, she cackled, "Joan took over? How is she?"

"Awful."

"How so?"

"I mean- she's doing fine-"

"How so."

"She was a cold woman and a punishing teacher."

Billie watched Lucile cower at each commanding question, it confused him to hear such simple words and yet she responded like there was gun to her head. Perhaps there was.

"And that's why you ran away?" Ruby snickered to herself, before taking some difficult breaths. She continued, "Joan was a sweetheart. We tutored the younger kids together. I was the one they hated; Joan was too soft. I haven't seen her in near seventy years and I wouldn't believe for moment you suffered at her hands. No, I know your type. Fortune telling, ha! You're a failure. That would be fine, most people aren't fit to be a witch. But you're to cowardly to admit it, you're too weak of heart to be the assistant you were meant to be. You ran away to play make believe, thinking that you're some clever magician for doing it."

Lucile looked devastated but not surprised.

"Let's hear it, why did you disobey? What's your excuse?"

She tried to speak, "I wasn't sure at first- and-" but she could complete the thought, perhaps even she didn't believe it.

Ruby's breathing sputtered, she laid back and Dorothy gave her water. When she was again able to speak, "enough. You're not worth the breath. Leave, get out of my town."

Lucile stood, head lowered beneath the branches. She moved swiftly toward the exit, leaving before the Steward had a change of temper, but then she paused ever so briefly to look at him. He would not look at her. She passed the girls and made it outside to fresh Spring air, free from the walls, free from looks of judgment, free of her own lies, but not free of conscience.

Continued

Billie felt his body tingle, with every shift in her eyes and twitch of her face he could feel the old woman probing him. When she raised her hand it was visceral, and uncomfortable. His face was anchored into a deep frown, perhaps due to betrayal, perhaps his on foolishness, or maybe a grief returning to him in full. The feeling made him recall a memory of catching a baseball. It was his right hand, a desperate effort, and he erred. The ball jammed his finger horribly, dislodging it. He had to leave the game for the hospital. He should have been happy as the doctor told him everything would be fine. His curiosity was restrained by his sorrow, even as the doctor lined up and bones and applied pressure until it-

A wave of vertigo rocked him even as he sat on the ground. "There it is," said Ruby.

Dorothy was keen on staying in between the man and her master, poised for an attack. Ruby pulled the eϛho into view and subjugated it. The domain wrapped around it like chains, and all it could do was cling to it's host, holding his shoulder with a free wrist.

"It has roots in him, but it hides beyond not inside."

Dorothy replied, "That makes this easier, but-"

"What was her name," asked Ruby.

"Marianne."

Billie perked up.

But they said nothing else about her, instead Dorothy went to retrieve a small jar. "Bill, this is sleeping powder. I'm going to put you under for a while, and when you wake up, we'll have you all taken care of." He looked absolutely pitiful. He shook his head and sniffed the gray dust in her palm. A moment later he was out.

Dorothy spoke, looking at the eϛho wearing her deceased friend's face, "it makes me sick. But, if we're not careful, could it damage his memories of her?"

"It already has," said Ruby. "Whatever it's pulled from him had to be replace with something. I don't think we could extract them without diffusing the whole thing over the course of weeks, holding it down the entire time. Mementomancy isn't my skill set either. No, the only person that could do it is him, gradually."

"If we do this then, he'll never be the same."

"It's already too late. We failed him the moment I failed to catch it. We do what we must to stop what we can. We can't put one man over everything I've fostered."

Dorothy took a moment, she already knew what decision she'd make, she just need a few seconds to stomach it. "We do what we must."

Dorothy began to make preparations for them to extract the eϛho and then perform the grafting. "Becky, fetch a scion from the garden, the best one we've got. And all the tools."

"No," Ruby forced out, her chest heaving up and down uneasily.

Dorothy went to her and was given new instructions. She cocked her head but didn't argue. It seemed fine at first, but she grew more and more unnerved. Instead of a single scion branch, an entire young tree was needed. A small pot of soil from their storage, with the Spicedancer worms they'd ordered, which she thought

was intended to expand their garden, after all the earth beneath the tree had already been treated with the worms long ago. In addition to their grafting tools, a sinister knife from Ruby's storage, one meant for flesh, not plants. Then Ruby sent the girls away and forbade them from leaving their room.

"You don't intend to give this eϛho an entire tree, do you? Isn't it a waste to experiment like this?" Dorothy spoke aloud, thinking that she had devised her master's plan.

"No. The time has come."

There was a spark in Dorothy's mind, and detection of certain tone of voice, a coalescence of information she chose to ignore. There was a quiver through her skin and a weakening in her knees brought on through her connection to the domain. She could feel her mother's condition worsening. In fear she paused her work and approached, "what do you mean?"

Ruby's eyes were clouding. "My body is done, but I am not. Dorothy, you've been a good apprentice. Now you'll carry out your final task, won't you? Your skills are adequate, but your tenacity is what I've always loved. I've put my lifeblood into the tree, but two is incomplete. We must be three. This eϛho, it's what I've been waiting for. Oh, I was grinning ear to ear when I let it slip into town, but then I lost it. I thought I would die with nothing to show for it, for all this effort. But look at It Dorothy! Look at how it's aged like wine, and even taking on a woman's form. It was meant for this. Ha! Maybe fate is real, and it's smiled on me. I want you to carve a spot from the center of the Tree, not a branch. Then I want you to carve the youngling's trunk. Then bind the thing to it, just as you've done before, I know you can. Then, then I want you to carve me. Use my knife and split my chest, break the ribs if you have to. Crack my breasts apart and let down blood like milk for our roots to drink. Lay the worms upon my heart, and plant the youngling within me, make sure the roots can pierce my organs. Then graft it to tree's trunk. Let three be one. I'll pull the domain close, I'll soak us within our own, and then you, you my loving daughter, my dedicated apprentice, you're final task: You will use you connection to keep it sealed as my consciousness fails. Bind us, tend to us, and my soul will find its new home. My flesh with be recycled, my vigor restored by this eϛho, my will carved upon my Tree of Murmurs. My name needn't live on for I will do so myself as an immortal witch!"

"This is insane," Dorothy said softly.

Ruby was staring up at her, sharp, determined, but with the brilliant red of a lifetime of magic stained eyes decaying away by the moment. Then she began to cough, and hacked out, "what are you waiting for?"

"I can't, you'll die in the process, the tree wasn't designed for this, it won't work," she said in disbelief of her master.

"Won't work? What have I trained you for? You're the only reason it won't work. I've thought this through, I feel it in my roots. There is enough of me in the wiŋd to sustain the triangle until the graft is stable. Tend to us with tape and wax and care. Keep the domain pressed tight, and the tree will reabsorb it, keeping my essence alive. I won't wake up immediately, I'll sleep until the wound is healed, and the worms have turned my muscle to fertilizer, and the roots finish the circuit. If you do your job, as I have instructed you, it will work."

"The domain- what about the town," Dorothy asked, eager to turn her mind to any other aspect of this plan than the dark surgery. "You're already unsteady, I'm unsteady, if I wasn't focused, I think I'd puke. We can't use it that way, and we shouldn't! The town, the children, our neighbors, our friends. We can't leave them exposed like this. They may not know it, but they put trust in us, we have a duty to-"

"To what?" Ruby barked. "These people chose to live here, chose to make their living, chose to build. We have a duty to solve problems they can't, not baby them with every little thing. Return to the old traditions, remake the chimes, perform cleansing rituals under the moon, have the girls patrol. I took care of this place before the domain was complete, you can too. Build your own domain, you proved you can today. Once I'm finished you can use what's left of mine as a seed."

"That'll take decades, these people have never lived like that" Dorothy leaned ever deeper over her master, pleading for anything else.

"They must! Let them sort through the whispɛrs in their ears, let them avoid the errant groωls, and process the wiɳd they breɑthe. Let them manage their own peace and avoid any creature that stalks the outskirts, as any smart person should. People have the strength to be more, just like you. Now show me that my apprentice is a splendid witch."

Dorothy sat back, without thinking she gripped her crucifix through the fabric of her shirt. She couldn't, she wouldn't process any of it.

Till Ruby's patience was gone, "are you still wearing that necklace? You don't have time for superstition. You're a witch, act like it."

And that was how Dorothy made up her mind. "We do what we must." She discarded all the tools and supplies of her master. She hunched over and clutched her mother's shoulders with both hands, and plunged a third into Ruby's chest. The wraith flesh fingertips slipped through without effort and gripped the heart. Ruby writhed in discomfort, and for a brief moment Dorothy pushed her further into agony, perhaps out of sadistic rage, maybe out of vengeful grief. But she hadn't time to waste on her own emotions. With Ruby now limp she could begin weaving herself into the domain.

The Tree of Murmur's leaves were thrashing, and the wiɳd around them skittered and trembled.

She called out to Becky, repeatedly, who finally broke orders and came to the door. Dorothy shouted, "No! Don't look. Tell your sister she can't come here. Then I need to come and help me, keep your eyes on the floor."

But the girl caught sight of the terrible pumping in the old woman's chest, and the lifeless gray color of her eyes. She did as she was told in a frenzy, much to her little sister's horrified confusion. She returned just in time to watch the eϛho crawl back inside the man sleeping on the soil.

"I need stimulants, the same ones we made last night. Food, water. I need you to make some Hag's Candy and get him up and out of here first. It's going to be a rough night, but we'll make it." Dorothy said this with a tender yet unconvincing tone, unbefitting of a person actively in the process of killing another in a prolonged painful fashion. Truly she was a splendid witch.

Eight of Rings

Lucile meandered up the block but was unable to bring herself to leave. She waited for some sign of what would become of Billie. After a long a while, she began to think of other plans to wait things out. But then the door opened, he staggered out, and her stomach lurched. He refused to look at her and made his way home holding his head and squinting his eyes.

"Hey! ah-" The little one, Donna called out.

Lucile hesitated, but he was leaving. She went to speak instead.

Donna clung to the doorway timidly, she said, "my sister said I needed to ask aunt Sherry to find you, but you're here."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. My sister says I can't see Dorothy or Ruby."

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know."

Donna left Lucile with a note. It said, "Don't leave, watch him. Help if you can." It was hastily written at an awkward angle, and the wording was vague and the penmanship hasty. The already weakened domain was loose and draining of its vibrancy. The message was clear enough.

Now Lucile sat in her motel room, staring at her bag. Her funds had dwindled. She had enough to stay one more night and buy a bus ticket. She could use the emergency money and buy tickets to make it to Wyoming, to her stash. "Drifters are meant to drift. A stranded tramp is as good as dead," that's what Kenny taught her. But she could also use those funds last a few more days.

Lucile went to the bar. It wasn't open, but it wasn't locked, The Bartender wore his leisure clothes and read a book at the counter. Few would come here on Easter. He looked up at her with an expectant eyebrow.

"Do you- need a waitress?"

He mulled it over it over for a moment and mumbled something about repairs. He asked a specific question, "is Bill coming tonight?"

"He's mad at me."

The Bartender perked up, the look in his eye reminded her of Sherry. He asked, "Do you know how to make an Old Fashioned?"

"I can make a Screwdriver."

The Bartender stifled a laugh. "Had dinner yet?"

In the following days Lucile would do something she never had before, work a job. And how the days flew by.

She ran her table in the day. While some people looked at her with a suspicion no doubt reinforced by her strange exit from the Easter festivities, others had heard tale of her and came to the with curiosity. She did her best to give them a little fun. Although the number of clients was still lower than she'd want, those that did stop by left tips.

This wasn't enough to sustain her though, a problem remedied by her short shift at the bar. In the late afternoon she'd slip inside, and The Bartender put her to work cleaning and preparing, then she'd take over for a few hours. He couldn't afford to pay her much, not on the razor thin margins of local hideout, something she understood. He paid in cash, included her dinner, and she kept any tips while on watch. For his part, The Bartender justified the expense by using the time to work on a mounting list of chores. Then he'd come take over, and Lucile would lounge about and chat, she even got to do a few readings.

Although he never specified how long, her employment was expressly temporary. While this inevitability sat in the back of her mind, she felt comfort that kindness was offered to her at all. Once The Bartender let her take home tips that were rightfully his, "He doesn't usually tip that much, so it must be for you," he said.

Waitressing was freighting at first, every customer was a local coming into their secret spot to relax and she interrupted their habit. After quelling her initial nerves, she slipped into an adaptation of her persona. The flood of faces and tasks and expectations didn't weigh on her, instead it weighed on 'Lucile the New Girl That's Still Getting the Hang of It.' The bar offered simple snacks and a nightly dinner special. Really it was the massive tome of cocktail recipes to worry about. That worry subsided too as most people just wanted beer, cider, or a rum & coke.

"Oh, you're still in town! I was looking for your booth," said a woman she vaguely recognized from the church.

Lucile called back, "I'm out front during the day," while moving to another person across the room. A follow-up to that conversation didn't manifest that night, but it did the next day.

Things went smoothly overall, even if it was exhausting. She did ultimately start to dip into her emergency funds. Her costs had risen, thanks to the burn on her hand. The line tracing up her arm she could bear with the application of ointment, but the burn on her arm was larger and deeper now, extend to the flesh around her wrist. She could feel it with every twitch of her finger muscles. Shuffling her deck was becoming difficult, and it would only get worse. The bandages on her arm didn't seem to bother the customers at the bar, but soon her hand would need covering. She couldn't serve food like that.

She kept thinking back to a day from long ago, when she was taught a simple alchemical treatment for this very problem. She couldn't recall it fully and each time the thought came to her, she cursed herself.

She tried to visit Billie every day. It didn't go well.

Monday morning, Lucile took a journey into the neighborhood. She found him as he was leaving his home, and from across the street Billie blew her off with a sneer. She couldn't go in the evening and so tried at night. Standing across the street in the dark made her feel like a fool. She spent the following days trying at other times. She either missed him, or he refused to answer the door. It occurred to her that she might follow him, but that would likely make things worse. She wouldn't press too much; she'd give him some time while keeping an ear out for any news of him.

There was no word from the coven, and every day she looked over the town and saw the domain wilt further. It was odd, for the longest time these blankets were a constant in every town she visited; grand constructs of magical power, implements of a witch's presence that weighed down upon her, smothering her every step. She never anticipated watching one fail, and she certainly didn't expect the sight to fill her with dread.

Queen of Rings -?

Lucile didn't hear from Lizzy that Monday. The girl was surrounded on all sides by family, friends, community, and their silent expectations. With pure intentions or ill, the whole intelligence (gossip) network of the town was waiting with bated breath. It was Tuesday that Lizzy silently appeared at the table, cloaked in a hoodie underneath a meltingly bright Spring sun.

"Skipping school?"

"Yeah," she groaned quietly.

Shuffling and waiting. The girl started and stopped a couple times, till eventually the story began to trickle, then flow, then spill forth as the experience returned to overwhelm her again. It was told through broken sobs, but Lucile gathered the story as thus:

On Monday, Lizzy returned to school, she felt sick and bizarre all day, surrounded by familiar faces living out familiar lives while hers would never be the same again. The boy sensed this, and seemed to avoid her, until they spoke after school in a shadowed nook tucked behind one of the school's rear entrances. His responses were stilted, only ever one word, "yes, uh-huh, okay." When Lizzy asked about telling his parents, he agreed to it then and there, and she for reasons she could not explain, perhaps stuck in a nervous delirium, rode home with him. The parents had no warning of what was about to happen and found out their son was seeing a girl at the same time they found out she was pregnant. Things rapidly deteriorated. The mother began to yell, the son yelled back in response. The father erupted, his voice so loud it hurt Lizzy's ears. He struck his son on the head and sent him away to his room. Lizzy asked to call her parents for a ride. The mother, while not directly, called her a slut, and then gave her the phone. This took place in Fort Ross, so it was about half hour

till Mrs. Crawford arrived. Lizzy spent thirty minutes sitting on a bench near the front door, unable to wait outside as the wind was biting. All while listening to shock, horror, and anger murmur through the walls.

"How are you feeling?"

Lizzy shook her head, "I'm just so tired. My parents- I- I have to decide. I can't take thinking anymore. He probably hates me. What will he say?"

"He wasn't ready. His parents panicked too. People are selfish and cowardly and strange about how they handle things. Things could go bad, you should be ready to defend yourself," Lucile stopped, "but maybe he just needs time."

Lizzy wiped away a forming tear, "you're right. of course. I know. I had to deal with my parents, I just have to wait for him to handle his."

The fortune teller had begun shuffling again. "So, what is it that you like about this boy?"

"He has a car."

"Oh- and?"

"Um, well, he's kind of charming and kind of handsome, and I think his grades are good. And he's funny; he told me a joke."

Lucile paused before clamping her mouth shut and shuffling faster.

"If our parents don't- What's the word when people run away together?"

"Elope? No! Lizzy, you cannot elope."

"I know! I know," she sighed, "I'm just- He'll come won't he? And when he does we'll do what we have to."

The cards were splayed upon the table, "maybe, only time will tell. Why don't you put your hand on the cards and I'll-"

"No," said the girl, "what do you think? Not the cards, you."

Lucile scooped up the cards, a little flustered, and said, "Lizzy, hun, people make dumb decisions, they do what suits them in the moment. He got you pregnant, and now there is a really good chance he'll-" But then she stopped. because the girl's expression had shifted with the slightest hint of anger.

After a moment Lizzy said, "he's not dumb. Do you really think that?"

"No. I'm just worried," Lucile sighed. "Lizzy, listen, what are you going to do if he doesn't want the baby?"

She was shocked at the suggestions, but when assured of the possibility, gradually began to consider. They talked about things like custody and child support, the details of which Lucile did not know. There were even worse possibilities left unsaid.

"I'm raising my baby, but I don't want him growing up thinking his daddy doesn't love him."

"You could lie, tell him that you got rid of the baby, drop out of school, hide away here, and make it work. Tell your baby the father died and meet another man."

"That's not right."

"I know, but you're in a tight spot. You'll have to do something." Lucile picked up her cards again, "let me read your fate. Maybe things won't be so bad."

Lizzy stood up, "no that's okay. I'll convince him if I have to. Thank you for talking with me, I feel- well I feel like I can think clearer."

As the girl walked away, fortune untold. Lucile shuffled the deck one last time and lifted the top card. She had forcibly collected what she needed from the girl, just enough to get an idea of what was in store.

But she stopped. Lucile noticed her own feelings of annoyance and frustration, and why? Because the girl didn't want to see the fortune teller's magic that to her must seem like a game? And for what reason did Lucile want to know? Perhaps to help, or maybe to prove something. But the girl already got the help she wanted, and maybe more than that too. Who knows what difficult conversations she'd been having with her parents.

Lucile began shuffling again, clearing the deck for the next client.

In the following days of talking with clients and chatting with customers at the bar, Lucile heard news of the Crawford's girl asking around town for work. There was nothing she could really do with these rumors, except when someone made a comment about the girl's situation in a dubious tone of voice, that was when Lucile would give them a stern look. Friday night some news came, the old woman that makes quilts and crochet crafts met with Lizzy at the knick-knack shop. The reason was unclear, but Lizzy wasn't waiting around.

Three of Swords

Monday morning, Billie left for work. His head still ached from the day before. He found little peace in sleep. He just barely remembered Dorothy's girls telling him they'd come when they could. Something went wrong it seemed. He chose to resume his life, to pretend everything was fine. However, he couldn't escape it so easily. Lucile was staring at him from across the street, interrupting his normal morning. He felt his nostril flare and quickly drove off.

"I don't owe her anything, I don't need her-" he said aloud, in anger and self-assurance, but silencing himself when a certain revelation crossed his mind. Suddenly he didn't feel comfortable speaking out loud. Even in his head, he became more focused on the queasiness of his stomach.

On arriving at work, it seemed the Law's got their RV, and curiously they were absent until near the end of the day when they called for him. They and Sean came out of the house together and announced they had signed over everything. Billie was too emotionally exhausted to be shocked, mostly he was bewildered at the speed of events. The Law's said goodbye, hardly acknowledging him and began loading things into the vehicle. That was the last he saw them; they left town late in the evening and never returned.

Sean took over management, announcing that the Laws were gone and with them any excess capital they'd saved along with the manpower. This only left him and Billie to work in the orchard and handle the business, and their part timer Jake. "Things are going to be tight, so here's my plan." He dictated that they would simplify production and expand distribution to make up the revenue. They couldn't waste time selling a hundred different jams and candies and baked goods. They had apples, eggs, and honey to move. This summarized Sean's general thinking, and that was the trouble for Billie.

"Why wouldn't I worry about it?" asked Billie, indignant of every change that sacrificed the soul of the orchard. This was a family business in a town that thrived on tourism. For as long as Billie had made this place his life, it wasn't just about selling apples, it was about selling the fantasy of the orchard.

"Because it's overkill, it always has been," Sean declared, fully dedicated to taking the most practical course of action to survive. "Just stick to the plan."

Thus began a very long week of arguing.

Mr. Law wasn't in the orchard or the tools shed. Not only would his brewing equipment would remain unused, but Sean wanted to sell it. Mrs. Law wasn't in the kitchen preparing all their goods for sale. No longer did the sweet smells waft out from the kitchen, blending bread and spice into the earthly odors of the trees. Marianne wasn't documenting statistics or decoratively wrapping goods.

Billie spent his evenings sipping on beer and half listening to the radio for whatever small scrap of relaxation it could bring him. It wasn't enough, for each day he was spent laboring in the uncanny Sean's Law's Orchard only gave more time for a festering anxiety to loom over him.

Friday, Billie spotted some movement between the trees. He found droppings, gnawed branches and missing leaves.

"We've gotta do something about the deer on the north end," said Billie.

"Can you please just follow the plan," Sean said, after a long week of bickering. "We have to finish pinching buds. We've got the chicken wire out there."

"Well obviously the chicken wire isn't enough."

"Just get your work done."

Billie could let go on a lot of things, but there was no sense in letting the herd demolish the trees. After finishing up for the day he went and bought the most overwhelmingly scented bars of soap the store had and returned with a full shopping bag, pocketknife, and string. He spent about half an hour spreading chunks of soap around the perimeter, then he'd tie some to the trees. It wasn't the best solution, but it was quick.

However, Sean approached, no doubt spotting his truck out front. "Bill, what're doing?"

"I clocked out; it's fine."

"That's not the point, man. I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to run my orchard."

"Just keep doing what we've been doing."

"That's not going to work anymore. We have to simplify what we're doing."

"That doesn't mean we have to half-ass things," Billie said. The hair on his neck stood up, his shoulders tightened.

"It means we have to focus on what matters. If I'm not careful this place could fail in a season or two. Look, at least the orchard is still here, at least we have work, okay?"

"We're not going to have work with you running it into the ground."

"God, you piss me off." Sean's thoughts were scattered and his voice shaky. "Marianne deserved better, I can't imagine how you treated her."

Billie stopped. "What?" The pressure in his head began to build, but the sensation didn't hit him as they stood motionless, eyes locked. Then the feeling of the knife pressing into his thumb caught his attention; he was bleeding. He didn't say word, if he allowed his jaw to crack even slightly a torrent of fury would spill forth.

Sean spoke, "Bill, I want you gone. You're fired."

He stayed silent and dropped all his supplies. He left the trees and his job. On his way home, he had to pull over to the side of the road to regain his focus as the aching in his head and the caustic tingle on his skin made it difficult to function. Sean stayed where he was, sensing something in the air. Over the coming season he would notice a pattern of branches and apples rotting in that area, he would fail to realize they were all in a line, the path Billie walked that day.

He came home to an empty living room, and passed the empty kitchen, and threw his clothes on top of the empty bed. He showered in scalding hot water that didn't seem to sting as much as the seizing throbs of his temples. He starred at himself in the mirror, the steam billowing around him, and for a split second he thought he saw someone behind him, a face in the twisting currents. He inhaled sharply but that shock was quickly

overwhelmed by frustration. Frustration for things which he had no control and things which were not his responsibility.

He couldn't be here any longer. He went for a walk.

It was somewhere beyond the hills and into the sage brush fields, following the line of wind chimes and ribbons, that he realized the evening sky was getting dark. He took a break to pull the stickers out of his socks. For all his pouting and stomping, here he was feeling no better. Here he was with no one to listen to him, but a horrible sense of something else was listening. In lonely twilight he said aloud, "it's my fault."

The Hermit

Billie was cold when he got home from his long walk. He stepped into the dark beyond his door and unexpectedly heard the scraping of piece of paper under his shoe. It was a note that someone had slipped underneath: "Are you okay? I'm at the bar every night if you want to talk - Lucile."

Saturday evening, after ruminating on the state of his life and his inaction, he stepped into the bar. He wasn't really sure he wanted to speak with Lucile, but he couldn't do nothing. The sight of the oasis was a welcome one, although it felt different. Something about the place was brighter, more energetic. And The Bartender was nowhere to be seen. Then Lucile stood up with an apron and empty tray. She saw him, but there was no time afforded for awkwardness as she was called to and fro. He sat at the bar as she strolled between the tables, less so gracefully and more so emphatically surviving.

She stopped and huffed with a smile, "would you like something to drink?"

He took a beer, and she got back to work. In between sips and glances into the mirror he caught a couple of people giving him strange looks.

He heard sounds coming from the hall that led to the kitchen and restroom, The Bartender passed by carrying a dusty box. Upon seeing Billie, he said, "oh thank god," and disappeared into the back to make a series of frustrated grunts until he returned with freshly washed hands.

"Have you talked to her?"

"She's been busy."

"Are you going to talk to her?"

"Well, I-"

"Billie, listen to me," The Bartender hissed. He pulled in close, "You gotta take her off my hands."

"What? Why, what's wrong?"

"Every. day. 'We should get more light in here; we need better coasters; have you thought about hanging a painting?' Thank God she's broke or she might of done it herself. Do you think I need to do these repairs myself? I could have hired someone. I only did this so I could see how things worked out for you two, I'm in it for the goss, you understand? You're going talk to that woman and stop her from decorating my bar."

Lucile stopped to fill a pitcher, and The Bartender told her something quietly. She replied, "okay, let me finish some things." She sounded tired. After she folded her apron behind the counter, Lucile tossed back a shot of cheap vodka. She stared at him a moment, evidently trying to fight through the burn.

Billie downed the rest of his beer, "hey," he said.

"Hey," she said. "So, do you want to go somewhere quieter?"

She wandered out first and he followed. The night was brisk. The didn't talk, not until they reached the center of town and she didn't know which way to go.

"Waitressing?"

"I need the money," she said, not quite looking him in the eye.

"What about your fortune telling?"

"I set up during the day, but I figured I needed something else."

"Do you like it?"

"A little, but either way it's temporary. He doesn't have the money to pay me forever. I'll have to do something else soon."

Billie stepped past her and turned them down a long street, she followed. Again things were quiet, until they came to a playground in the center of the neighborhood.

"I got fired," he said neutrally.

"I heard something about that."

He huffed with a mad grin, "of course. What are they saying?"

"That the orchard was sold and that there was a big fight."

"Yeah, that's about right."

"How's your arm," he asked. "Your hand wasn't like that before, was it?"

Her right hand was wrapped in bandages with her little fingers poking out from in between. "No, this is from what happened at the church."

"Is it going to be okay? Is there anything you can do?"

"It'll be healed, eventually, but it might be marked." She held it up and examined it mournfully.

"Can Dorothy do anything about it?"

"Maybe, but I don't think she would."

Again, things went quiet. Finally, he squared up, looked her in the eye, and asked, "why did you lie to me?"

The excuses easily bubbled up, and she started to speak but stopped.

He saw the look on her face, and he sighed. He added, "just tell me the truth," and the words rubbed through her like tender sandpaper. He waited.

She inhaled and said, "because Dorothy didn't want my help, and I took it personally, and I couldn't read your fate but I had to do something, and then you wanted to talk with your wife again, and I didn't know how to tell you. Then I just kept going."

He continued to stare.

"I thought if you came to terms with things, a white lie wouldn't matter."

His face softened into an expression no less upset, he looked off into night sky.

"And I really did want to help you," she added.

"... thanks for trying." He said it with such finality but didn't move. Didn't look and her either.

The moment dragged on. Lucile asked, "do you know what happened in the house after I got kicked out?"

"No, but I know I still have something inside me, and it makes my skin crawl. Did they tell you anything?"

"The little one told me I couldn't leave and to watch you." Lucile looked around, seemingly at nothing and everything, "something bad happened, the domain has been degrading. I don't think I should bother them, I don't think I'm welcome. But I'll help if I can. I have to."

"Okay, I'm going to go talk to them tomorrow. I'll let you know what happens."

"Sounds good."

They ended things there. She didn't ask for forgiveness, he didn't offer it.

Page of Rings -reversed

Sunday morning, Billie left early on an impulse to catch Dorothy before she left for church, but he would find this was unnecessary. He could have waited till after, but he felt things were somewhat urgent. After a couple knocks Becky allowed him inside, grumbly and tired. She cracked the sliding door to the courtyard and demanded that he not look inside. It was awkward, trying to cast his voice out while Becky stood guard.

Dorothy called out. She too seemed a bit sleepy, yet she was straight to business. "Billie, has something happened?"

"No, not any magic stuff, anyways."

She guaranteed to remove the eçho inside him, but not for some time; other issues had come up. She asked about Lucile, "good. Good. Ask her to help, just don't let her do anything strange."

All of this was strange, but Billie kept that to himself. "I have something else to ask you. Lucile's arm has been burned, by this Thing. Do you have anything for that?"

"Yes. Becky, get him the salve."

The girl popped her head through the door, "we're all out. I told you when you asked me before."

"You did? That's right, I-"

Billie noticed now that Dorothy's breathing was a little more than tired, and he hadn't heard anything from the old woman.

She eventually said, "Becky, make some more. You have to watch it the whole time, and make sure-"

"I can do it."

Before they closed the door, Dorothy said one last thing, "and Billie, please don't leave town for now."

Becky shut the door and began flipping through a thick binder of mismatched notes.

Billie caught glimpses of what seemed like an old granny's cookbook but filled with strange symbols and out of place phrases like 'alchemical activation', and odd recipe names such as 'Hag's Candy' and 'Moan Stones'. Then he looked around for the source of the odor assaulting his nostrils. The scent was musky, but it felt like it had texture, grainy and rough. The kitchen was a disaster, strange pots and utensils laid about, dirtied by indeterminate sludges.

"Hey, is there anything I can do to help?"

"Don't touch anything," Becky replied forcefully, while opening the pantry to look for ingredients.

Billie noticed how barren it was, aside from an array of well-organized jars she was looking through. "What about groceries," he asked, cracking open the fridge, finding it nearly empty as well.

"Could you," she exclaimed suddenly.

He watched her grim facade evaporate as she explained what they needed. His own concern only grew as apparently, they had been surviving on trail mix and peanut butter & jelly sandwiches for the past week. "What about vegetables or meat," he asked.

She seemed to shrink, "I don't know how to cook those."

"That's fine. You know what, I'll take care of it. Is there anything else you guys need, anything at all?"

Becky pondered it for a moment and answered, "Donna's been asking for ice cream."

"What kind?"

"Rocky Road."

"And what about you?"

She looked petrified, as if answering were dangerous, "I'm fine."

"Okay, but what's your favorite, I'm curious. Mine is Playdough." He surprised himself with his own overly cheery voice.

"Huckleberry."

"That's a good one. Alright, I'll be back. Thank you for the hard work."

When Billie returned, no one answered the door. Eventually he tried the knob, his hunch was correct. Becky was hard at work, scampering between a pot on the stove and a special looking glass chemistry bowl full of powder. She acknowledged his presence, so his came in quietly and put away the groceries. He got the requested items and more, whatever simple things he thought the girls could make for themselves, toilet paper too.

As he stocked the freezer with ice cream, she suddenly yelled, "you bought both!"

"And some other stuff too!" He beamed, ready to be a hero, but she was genuinely worried.

"But- I- Thank you." And her serious demeanor returned, almost angry.

She told him he'd have to wait. He thought to help clean, but it was best to stay out of the way. He spent the next half hour on the couch till she called, rousing him from a half-sleep.

"It needs to cool."

"Sound good," he said. From his spot he could just barely see her moving about the kitchen.

Becky looked over the new contents of the fridge, then the freezer. And for a moment everything went silent, just around the corner and out of his line of sight. Then she closed the freezer door, and he heard the ping of a spoon in the sink.

Soon she presented the finished salve, with a lighter air about her. "Here you go!"

"Thank you," he said, pleased with himself. "Hey, Dorothy seems busy, and you're working hard too. Do you want me to come over and help out?" He gestured to the general disarray.

"Maybe," she said, "I'll ask."

Before leaving he briefly drew her attention to the carrots, cucumbers, turkey, and cheese. She took offense, "I know how to make a sandwich!" And that made him feel better about leaving.

Upon getting home, Billie realized he too was in need of groceries. The cashier was confused to see him a second time, buying many of the same things. Upon opening his wallet, He also realized he no longer had job. He'd need to make this last.

Billie met Lucile in the early afternoon at her table. She finished up with a local couple, and he sat down. She was shuffling as always but noticeably favoring her left hand. He slid the jar on the table, she raised an eyebrow.

"It's for you burn. Becky made it."

She perked up. She popped the lid and took a sniff, "Oh my gosh!" She began unwinding her bandages and applying it quick as she could.

He saw how bad it had become. The line of skin up her arm cracking and scabbing, and mark around her wrist was black and bubbled like the fat of charred pork.

"You got this for me?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Thank you. This feels so much better."

She was ecstatic and lively, but he had a hard time enjoying the gratitude, maybe because of her wounds, maybe because of his.

Hard Times in Atomic Springs

Sunday Night

Billie was relying on her, he had no choice but to be patient. He watched Lucile rewrap her bandages, and they discussed the witch's decision.

She sat back in thought, then laughed to herself glibly, "so now they need me." She looked over the jar in her hands, "and do you want my help?"

"If you've got any ideas, I'll give it a shot."

She leaned in, "so, do you want to learn magic?"

He scoffed, his eyebrows raised, and grin crept across his face. It was just one thing after another. "What do you mean?"

"I can't really do anything for you, but if you learn some of the basics it help you be more aware or even control things better. It'll take a while, but it'll tide you over until a witch can take care of the rest.

“Alright. When can we start," Billie asked, eager to set anything into motion. "Or do you need to get some more work done?"

Lucile began to clean up her things. "No that's alright. I think this town is just too small for me to turn a profit, not enough people are interested, and I think I've been here long enough to snag the ones that are."

"People aren't avoiding you still, are they?"

"No, I think things have been going well actually."

"That's good."

"It is, but I am still in the hole. So, tonight I have plans. But for now, let's get started."

They needed a little space and privacy. Billie wasn't in the mood to use his home, and Lucile suggested somewhere he would feel comfortable. She produced a key and gestured to the bar.

The Bartender was in the habit of sleeping in the day, locked up high within the darkened chambers of the old apartments on the floor above; they'd have several hours alone.

Lucile suggested trying the jumpstart ritual again. Several attempts later she asked, "do you feel anything?"

"I guess my hands might be a little tingly,” he said. However, he thought it was most likely just the sensation of touch. With each attempt he closed his eyes and relaxed his breathing, and when no fantastical sensation arose in him, he was left only with the feeling of her fingers trembling on his palms.

She sat down with a furrowed brow. He encouraged her not to give up that quickly. "Okay, maybe it worked, and you just can't tell," she said. "Let's try this." They set chairs across from one another and sat. She made sure he was comfortable and began shuffling up a storm, getting her hands hot. Then the meditation began.

"Okay. Close your eyes. Take deep breaths until you forget about this room. Look inside yourself for the place where your blood touches the sky." That was all the explanation she gave him before closing her own eyes, holding out her hands, and gently ebbing and flowing as though she was pushing the air towards him.

He broke, "seriously, what am I trying to do?"

She struggled with the words, "it's like a sense. Like how you know where your hands are in the dark, mixed with balancing on bike, and it's deep and fills you, but too shallow to fully grip and feel like it might slip at any moment, like a cold air hitting the bottom of your lungs. "

He tried his best at grasping the inscrutable hidden mechanisms of the body, until they heard creaking on the floor above them.

Lucile said, "I have some other ideas."

Billie replied, "yep, we'll just keep on trying."
They called it quits for the night.

The Bartender came down and made a show of raising an eyebrow to their presence; he clearly heard them long before. "Having fun? Lucile, can I talk to you?"
They stepped aside about three feet to some symbolic privacy while Billie sipped a glass of water.
Lucile asked in a hushed voice, "it's okay that I borrowed the room, right?"
"Yeah, you're fine. It's been good having your help lately, but I think it's about time."
"We're still on for tonight right?"
"Yes."
"Well, if I'm going to be hanging around, you might as well let me work one more night, right?" Her puppy dog eyes were accented with a fox's grin.
The Bartender hid his face and began towards the door before anyone could see him smile. "I do have some errands I need to run, so get things open for me."

"You two get along well," said Billie while lending a hand.
"He doesn't talk much, but he's a sweetheart."
"What exactly are your plans tonight?"
"I organized a poker game."
"Oh."
Lucile stopped what she was doing, detecting a hint of something in his voice. "You're out of a job right now, you don't want to come and lose more money do you?"
He cocked his head, detecting a hint of arrogance in her voice, "are you saying I don't know how to play cards?"
"Not like I do."
They began to banter, and ultimately Lucile relented, "You can come if you want, but you have to buy in like everyone else. By the way, how's the job situation?"
"I was thinking about going to see my dad up in Fort Ross, but Dorothy wants me to stay in town. I'm not sure what I'll do."
Lucile had a knowing look on her face, perhaps she knew something he didn't.

The evening passed leisurely. Billie watched Lucile work, and he slowly picked out who it was she had invited to this game. Several men gave her meaningful looks and nods, as well to each other, and frequent glances towards the clock. The anticipation was palpable.
He began to want company, sitting alone at the bar. However, he found it exceedingly difficult to leave his seat. While people-watching he caught other's eyes, and their expressions did not seem welcoming. These past months he'd spent a lot of time on this chair, never really speaking to anyone. People would greet him, ask how he was. His words were few, and never did he ask back. Or perhaps it went farther back than that, to the years spent by Marianne's side, to the years when she did all the talking, because she knew and cared for each individual person in this town, each success affected all others. But Billie, he really only cared about Marianne. She was all he needed. He stayed put for the night, he still wasn't ready, maybe out of some sense of embarrassment for not truly knowing any of his neighbors.

At the evening's end, they snuck into the back hallways, up the stairs to The Bartender's dining room. Lucile set the table and began shuffling a deck playing cards. Gradually their opponents arrived. There was Old Charles, an accomplished oil worker that spent his time with his family or soothing his bones in the hot springs.

Next was Josh Ortiz the mechanic, always up for a good time. Then there was Carlos, who crept in nervously, "I was starting to think the wife wouldn't go home without me."

The Bartender joined them shortly after locking up downstairs. He put out some snacks while Lucile began collecting. Billie thumbed through his wallet, but was shocked at the buy in. He sheepishly asked to just spectate, but all the men agreed to let him in with fifty. "This is just a casual game after all," said Carlos.

The lovely dealer gave a final flourish to her shuffle and said, "alright boys, I have bills to pay, and I warn you I learned from the very best gambler this side of the Mississippi."

Everyone chuckled and the game began, but it was no casual game, it was slaughter. Billie was knocked out quickly, which resolved any lingering objections of his participation. He was left to watch Lucile hustle the rest of the table. He didn't see it at first, but her ever growing pile of chips didn't lie. Only The Bartender stayed anywhere close to even. All the while she put on a great act, teasing and laughing, but always insisting she knew what she was doing, which everyone had apparently thought was a joke. The end of the game came, Old Charles was a good sport, Josh was little less jovial, Carlos seemed nervous, and Lucile was up.

"Well boys, I'll let you win some back next week!"

Everyone agreed to another game and called it a night. Lucile locked the door to the bar, and waved to the upstairs window, just barely lit, not nearly enough to even tell in The Bartender waved back. He did of course.

Billie stood awkwardly with something on his mind. He asked in disapproval, "you really do know how to play cards, but is this really the best way for you to make money?"

Lucile turned to face him, bundling up in her sweatshirt, and said defensively, "I'm all out of money, what else am I supposed to do? I had to use my emergency funds, and I still have to stick around until this is done. I don't do this often; it's my last resort."

"Yeah," he groaned, "it just worries me."

"Look, it'll be okay. I heard we'll have good weather this week, and I'm not waitressing anymore so I'll try running my table in the evenings, maybe some tourists will show up, I'll get back to a comfortable amount in my purse and I'll let the boys win some back next week."

"Okay," he said. "You could try getting another job around town. I'm going to start asking around tomorrow."

"Maybe," she said. "I don't see any 'help wanted' signs around, and I don't really think anyone would want to help me."

Billie nodded towards the bar, "he helped you."

"Yeah," Lucile didn't really have a response.

Monday Morning

Donna waited for instructions from within the bedroom, which she'd been badgered to clean. Now she just listened to the quiet of the lifeless house. Becky had stayed home from school all last week, and now she had too as well. At first, she thought it might be fun, till her older sister reminded her of their make-up work. She hadn't seen Dorothy in a week, whenever Sherry stopped by to check in Becky would turn her away, blaming illness.

Then Becky came and brought her to the precipice of the courtyard but stopped her from looking inside. Dorothy's voice was weak, "your sister has a lot of work to do for me, and I need you to do something very important. Can you go out by yourself?"

Lucile had set up her table near the center of town that morning and was startled by the movement in her peripheral vision. Only to feel a relief and embarrassment when it turned out to be the youngest coven girl. It was odd, being raised to be a witch the girl's breαth and pneuma were stronger than a normal person, Lucile should have felt her approach, yet the girl was so timid it felt like she didn't want to be noticed. Even standing right to the table it wasn't clear she wanted to talk.

"Your name was Donna, right?"

Silence.

"Were you sent to check on me?"

Donna's eyes turned downward.

Lucile changed tact and scooped up the deck, "or did you come to see Madam Delphina's magic for yourself?"

"No," she corrected, then quieted, "I came to check."

"Oh? That's too bad. I love the arts of fate, it's my favorite of all magics. Do you have a favorite?"

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

"I'm not good at anything."

"Don't say that," she said kindly to no response. "Maybe you're not good at anything yet. Maybe you'd like me to read your fate and tell you where your studies might lead," she asked splaying the cards.

Donna came a little closer, although she never said yes. Eventually curiosity spurred her to ask about the tarot's artwork. They went over a few, their enthusiasm growing, until Donna pulled one over and gasped.

"And that's number thirteen: Death," said Lucile

The girl set it down, eager to get the skeletal knight away.

"Did it scare you?"

"That's creepy," she said.

"It's alright, Death is a good card. Sort of."

"Why?"

"It represents things coming to an end, but life continues on. Endings followed by new beginnings. Sometimes it's called Death-rebirth. You know, like making a big change."

Donna seemed more intrigued than horrified now. They were approached by Billie, who reminded the girl of her task. She pointed at him, "Oh, what about that?"

"I'm going to teach him some basics so he can better control himself."

"Okay I'll tell her." Donna got ready leave, but stopped and asked, "could I hear about the other cards sometime?"

"Of course."

Becky was busy on the phone, so Donna slid open the door and went in to report, but quickly remembered she wasn't supposed to enter. Dorothy sat on a mound of detritivorous roots and dirge moss that soaked in bile-black soil. The air smelled of decay & filth.

She covered her face.

Dorothy said, "it's okay, just focus on my eyes. It'll be okay."

The little one gradually peaked out and found comfort in the vibrant green of Dorothy's gaze. Then she relayed the message.

Dorothy sighed, "that'll work. We'll have to address his education later." Her brow was covered in sweat, her skin was pale, but she sat steady in the dark. She began to resume focus, but Donna asked a question.

"Have you heard of fate magic?"

"One of the four Esoteric Magics, used for looking into the past and future but often vague or inaccurate. Some witches don't even believe fate is real, it's just some coincidences that fools have faith in."

Donna, who spent all her young life around the witches of the Grand Old Coven said the following with complete childish sincerity, "isn't that like church?"

The witch's glare intensified in shock. She considered her words, "why do you ask, anyway? Did the fortune teller say something about it?"

The girl sensed the change in tone, "I just thought the cards were pretty."

Dorothy thought. In one hand she held her necklace, with another she stroked the moss, and with a third unseen hand plunged into the heart of the mound she felt the burden of her position. She said, "as long as you are strong with the fundamentals of witchcraft, as long as you can do what must be done, there's nothing wrong with exploring different things on the side."

Donna seemed content, even a little emboldened.

Becky came in looking annoyed and concerned that her little sister had seen the truth, but everything seemed fine, so she reported her phone call, "they won't tell me anything."

"Even with my credentials?"

Becky just shook her head.

Dorothy sighed, "I'll call for a weather report later then. For now, I need you girls to do some brewing."

Donna got to spend the night assisting her older sister in some basic alchemy, even if she didn't get to do any of the fun parts herself.

Monday

Billie set out for his Monday morning job hunt. He knew it wasn't likely to find work, and he didn't. Things were tight for everyone in town. What bothered him though, were the reactions to the idea of giving him odd jobs. While everyone was cordial enough, he felt there was nothing motivating them to keep him in mind. This culminated with the waitress of the cafe.

"Anything at all, you let me know," he said.

And she replied, "Billie, do you even know my name?"

A petrifying chill came over him. He knew her, or Marianne knew her, she attended the women's group at the church every week and he'd see them talking when he arrived to pick up his wife. The waitress's name was-

She scoffed and rolled her eyes, "I'll let you know."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sure," she went back to work.

Billie left the cafe and remembered her name was Jean. He went home and as if possessed he began cleaning. He hadn't made any changes since Marianne's death, in leu of making progress on what he wanted he made progress on what he could. He called his mom around lunch, usually it was her forced to call him. Some light conversation turned into light nagging, and he confidently assured her he had his situation under control.

He joined Lucile in the afternoon and they went for a walk. They travelled the paths tracing the fields before circling towards the hills. They made some idle chat in between attempts to awaken his magical senses. Lucile would describe the feel of the wiɳd and the soμnds around them, in hopes that he might sense unseen things.

"Look right there," she pointed.

"That is a flower," he said dryly.

She knelt down and held her hand underneath the petals, "no no, right here, do you see this pink little ball of spring?"

He stared blankly.

She warmed up her hands and cupped them around nothing and gently carried it to him like a lost moth. "Alright, hold still and open yourself to everything around."

He tried to, as vague an instruction as it was. Then she shoved her hands directly towards his face. He flinched.

"Did you feel it?"

"Why'd you do that?"

"Why'd you flinch?"

They squabbled for a moment. He relented and agreed to sit on the grass. With his eyes closed he listened and waited for her to catch a whispɛr and throw at his head. He heard her approach, wait, and then asked if he felt anything. He was mostly happy he didn't get bonked with a rock. They repeated this a few times. If he had sensed anything, he couldn't distinguish it from the breeze. The last one took her longer than usual.

"Having a hard time," he asked.

"I got it, just give me a sec, stop moving!" She was stumbling in the grass somewhere behind him.

Then she approached, and he listened for her foot falls, but she went silent. For a brief moment he felt all alone, the spring breeze died off, the twingling behind his eyelids stabilized, and his hair was raising. Suddenly, he felt inclined to look to his left, "hey, where'd you go?"

"You did it," she blurted, standing behind him.

"I did?"

"Why'd you look left? What made you do that?"

"It just seemed like you were over there."

"Nope, I tossed a mðan right passed you. Hold on, let's try again."

He watched her scramble to capture it again, but it slurmped into the earth, denying them repeat testing.

They parted ways for the evening, and Billie returned home to do more cleaning, which went quickly. The real challenge was deciding what to do with all the little things Marianne left behind. He turned on the radio to listen to discourse on the weekend's baseball games, but while turning over a knick-knack in his hands the noise became too much. It was odd but true, dealing with the little memories took all the brain power he had.

Lucile spent her evening at her table, meeting more of the locals and a couple couples heading to the hot springs for an evening together. It was slow and pleasant, but once again her revenue was insufficient. Eventually she lost heart and decided to look around town. The craft shop had a Leave-a-Book-Take-a-Book just outside. She made a note to return with the one she'd just finished.

Tuesday

Billie exhausted his job search and tried the cork board at the church. He spent ten minutes examining it, tapping his foot with accelerating rhythm; the board was empty save for a lost cat poster that had been there for the half a year. The poor creature probably wandered off in the brush, got lost, and starved to death all alone. Just like Billie was going to, forced from his home, selling his truck to get by, wandering up the highway back to Fort Ross, and never being seen again.

He lingered too long at the board, and Sherry appeared. She talked his ear off about how worried she was for the girls and Dorothy, confiding in him her secret theories about old Ruby Marsh and what must be going on over there, each idea more scandalous than the last.

He could only humor her, "yeah, I mean, who knows, right?"

Sherry stopped and changed topics, "Billie, if you're not working, you could always come to the men's group."

"Think someone would have something for me?"

"No, I just think it would be good for you."

"Maybe, I'll think about it."

She began another round of gossip and sneakily using the topic to nonchalantly interrogate him on his interactions with Lucile. He managed to make his escape and took a deep breath. The tension of his mood was broken, he relaxed into a sullen calm. Maybe the cat was still out there hunting voles and finches, hanging out with other strays.

He found Lucile with Carlos and crept with earshot.

"Anyways, I do need to get back soon, but you see, I kinda lost too much money on the game, and-" Carlos was practically vibrating with nervous energy, it was hard to watch.

Lucile said, "do you want to play a hand? Win some back?"

"Yes," he cried.

She stowed her tarot deck on her hip and replaced it with a box of playing cards. She waved to Billie who took a seat on a nearby bench to wait. Carlos nearly jumped upon realizing someone had been watching. After being calmed down, they proceeded to play a few rounds of blackjack. Lucile was shuffling lazily and dealing cards in a relaxed fashion. However, Carlos made a couple bad decisions, indebting himself little further. He obviously wanted to win back much more, but he was too afraid to make a larger bet and that was for the best.

A van pulled up alongside them, and Billie tried to warn him, but it was too late as Carlos's wife called out to him. He spun around in a panic scattering cards on the sidewalk.

"Oh, hello dear!"

"Why aren't you watching the shop," Cindy asked annoyed.

"Just on lunch!"

And then her voice grew dark with an unsaid meaning between them, "are you playing cards?"

"No! No, just having my fortune read!"

"Those are playing cards," she said, eyes narrowing to deadly glare.

"It's a different style," said Lucile, "I like to use these for love readings. Hearts instead of cups."

Carlos tried to reassure his wife, but she didn't seem happy when she said, "I'll see you at home." He got up to leave but turned back upon remembering his unresolved wager.

"Don't worry about it. We'll do this another time," Lucile said.

He left and Billie began helping her clean up the cards.

"Maybe we're not the only ones having money trouble," Billie said, then he eased in, "Do you think you should have given him his money back?"

"I didn't take anymore," Lucile defended.

"I know, and that was good, but I feel like you were out of everyone's league."

She thought and said, "He lost in a fair game, he agreed to it, and it wouldn't be fair to everyone else that lost."

"That's true," said Billie. "I just think getting money this way is-" but he cut himself off, as Lucile was waiting intently for him to finish.

She spoke, "he would have taken my money, the last of my money. I just need to my emergency money and enough to get by. I'll stop after that."

"Okay, but why don't we look for work for you too? Nobody needs me right now, but the diner might want an extra waitress. Sherry might have ideas."

"If there's no work for you there's no work for me. People aren't going to make room for a stranger."

He thought to bring up The Bartender, but he was getting the sense that continuing to bicker wasn't worth it.

Both of them did, as Lucile said, "let's just get some practice in, okay?"

He tried to change the subject as they packed up Lucile's things.

"By the way," he said hopefully, "you're not wearing bandages."

"Yep! That cream worked wonders. Thank you, again."

"Is it all going to heal? Does it feel better?"

"Oh no," she showed the darkened strip of skin leading between her fingers to her neck. There were small scabs and cuts dotted up her arm where the flesh had broken before treatment. "All of this is still dead. It feels like a soft callus, kind of itchy. It'll all break down and get replaced, but it takes a long time. Better than having it all fall off."

It was later on that evening, before they parted ways Lucile said to him, "maybe you were right, Carlos did seem desperate. You don't think he'd try something, would you?"

Billie responded, no, he's not going to try something."

But before he could continue the thought she interrupted, "right. It'll be fine. it'll be fine."

He didn't have much else to say at that moment, but he did some thinking afterwards.

Intermission

The domain was reduced to a faint husk, to withered strands, and Dorothy's condition was getting worse, at least that's what Donna thought. Becky was getting worse too, brewing all day, draining their supplies, constantly taking in more candles to burn. All Donna could do was help clean, but then Becky would dismiss her to make room in the kitchen, so then she would try to focus on schoolwork, but then Becky would demand her help again. If she tried to listen to the radio, Becky would shout to turn it down. She sulked and cowered on the couch. "I want to go outside," she muttered, "I want to go to school."

Becky sat down beside her and said softly, "did you see the freezer?"

Donna's first thought was of her next chore, but the teary swelling under her sister's eyes indicated something else. She fetched the step stool and miraculously found the fridge stocked with ice cream. Her heart left with excitement, and she ran back to her sister, "can we-"

However, Becky had fallen asleep. Donna crept back to the kitchen, but before the any schemes of ice cream dreams could come to fruition, she heard the popple-hopping of a boiling pot's lid. Donna took the stool to check on it.

"Stop!"

Donna shuttered and let go of the lid. Becky stormed into the kitchen and pulled her away.

"Don't touch it."

"I just wanted to help," said Donna.

"I can't have your help. Go do homework or practice."

Becky returned to her extensive set of tasks, taking a brief moment to glare at her little sister still lingering. Donna didn't go to do homework or practice, she went to Dorothy. She didn't beg or make a fuss, she pouted, something that her new coven mother found far more frustrating.

"Is something wrong?"

"No," moaned Donna under her breath.

Dorothy sighed, "do you want to talk about your lessons?"

"No."

Despite how it may have seemed, within the courtyard the witch was hard at work, and couldn't spare the emotion to help the girl, she could find the energy to say, "will you run an errand for me? I need you to go to the hardware store and find a longer cable for the phone, so I can use it from in here. Take my wallet and also go check on Lucile. Let me know if they've made any progress."

Donna perked up, but before she left, "but don't you need help here? Will Becky be mad?"

"What we're doing is difficult, but there's no point if we don't take care of the people around us. Go and be my eyes."

At the hardware store Donna found a section of cords and wires of all different kinds, but couldn't identify the one she needed, or even see those on the top shelf. She looked up at the men grumbling and grunting to each other at the counter. They didn't notice her and each moment she waited the words in her throat became heavier and heavier. She left empty-handed and went to seek out Lucile instead.

She spotted Lucile and the afflicted man with the scary eҫho entering the old boarded-up apartment building at the end of the strip. She tried knocking on the door. Nothing happened. Alone on the sidewalk, she could do nothing but think about returning home in defeat. Each passing second made it more and more likely. On an impulse she knocked once more. The wood hurt her little knuckles, but there was an answer.

"Who- oh hey, did you come to see me?" Lucile opened the door and invited her in.

The lights were dim and gentle compared to the sun, and Donna marveled at the hidden restaurant inside.

Lucile asked, "so what brings you here?"

"I'm supposed to check on you," Donna said, before quietly adding, "and buy a cord, I couldn't find it though." The adults looked at one another and asked her to elaborate. When she finished, she said, "I can't do anything right."

"Don't say that," said Lucile. She nodded to Billie, who understood and took a seat while the ladies talked things out. "What's wrong?"

"Becky keeps yelling at me, she does everything without me," and Donna paused thinking of some stray memory better off forgotten. "Maybe they'll make me leave."

"Did your sister tell you to leave?"

"She doesn't want my help."

Lucile spoke to her and gently as she could, but the deck had made its way into her hand. She asked, "Have things been okay over there? How's the Steward?"

"Mother Ruby is gone. Dorothy won't leave the tree; it smells bad. Becky keeps brewing stuff and yelling at me." Donna began to choke up.

After calming her down, Lucile said, "I think your sister has taken on a lot of responsibility," but struggled to follow up the thought.

Billie said, "Your sister cares about you. She's the one that asked to get you ice cream."

"She did?" And from there Donna's mood began to improve.

Lucile gave her report. "We're making some progress, he does better with practical stuff so today we're going to play peekaboo for a while, and then maybe," she trailed off.

Billie finished for her, "should we try that jumpstart again?"

"He means a breαth sharing."

The little one knew what they meant, and Billie got a sudden idea, "sweetheart, have you done it before? Could you show us?"

She replied timidly, "You want me to show you?"

Lucile took the opportunity. "Yeah, I'd like your help, Donna. You see, I'm not really good at witchcraft, that's why I became a traveler."

"Do I have to become a traveler?"

"No, I bet your sister would be heartbroken if you did. Here, come help me." Lucile shuffled her deck and warmed up her hands, building as much breαth as she could. Then she took the girl's hands.

Donna waited then asked, "are you doing it?"

"Yes, did you feel it?"

"Um, it was too soft. You have to squeeze it more I think, like this."

Donna pushed back and Lucile sat bolt upright.

"Oh wow, I forgot what that felt like. You're good at that."

Donna blushed and averted her eyes.

They tried again and this time she confirmed Lucile's success. Lucile strolled across the room with a spring in each step and took Billie's hands. He cried in shock and half fell off the stool. "He felt it!"

Donna didn't know this would be so exciting for them, but she giggled all the same, mostly at his expense.

"Before you go," said Lucile, "how about I tell your fortune? You deserve a reward for your help." Lucile performed her show, providing ample time for Donna to wonder at all the cards and enjoy the finer detail of the ritual that most other people wouldn't see. "Now, place your hand upon the cards and ask your question. Do you still need to get that cord? Do you want to ask about that?"

Donna thought quietly and asked, "Will Becky be mad at me when I get home? If I can't get it, will she be mad?"

Lucile slipped as she was scooping up the cards, but she recovered and dealt the cards into a larger array, mostly just to put on a big show. She had half a mind to lie if the reading was poor, maybe some optimism might skew the outcome, but to her relief fate also smiled upon the girl. She said, "Your sister won't be mad at all. She'll thank you because you'll have the cord, and she'll be happy because you're her little sister."

Donna left renewed.

As the door to the bar closed, Billie said, "hey hang tight for a minute."

"Where are you going?"

"To make sure she gets that cord."

He snuck along behind Donna to the hardware store. At one point he was nearly caught in the act, as she began looking around as though someone called her name. He hid behind a car and recalled Lucile saying something about the feeling of being watched. When she continued onward, he followed without looking directly at her. Hiding just behind the entrance of the hardware store, he was pleased to hear Donna had the gumption to ask for help.

Billie went back before she could catch him. Sitting down with Lucile he said, "the mission was a success." But when the celebrating was done he said, "those girls have it rough, don't they?"

"Yeah," whispered Lucile, "that's life in the coven."

Donna announced that she got the phone cord, but Becky did not immediately shower her with praise. She was angrily scraping away at a pot, forehead covered in blackened sludge.

"Good job, do you know how to do the phone for Dorothy?"

Donna shook her head, and after a moment of watching her sister scrub away she said, "want me to do the dishes?"

All at once Becky softened, "yes please, thank you. I'll take care of that."

They switched jobs, and Becky brought the house phone into the courtyard such that Dorothy could make all the calls she needed. Becky was quietly relieved that she wouldn't have to prevent aunt Sherry from coming to check on them any longer. Then she joined her little sister in the kitchen, and they spent the rest of the day together cleaning up all their alchemical vessels before she needed to start another project.

Wednesday

Dorothy called the local weather service and asked for a 'Confederal Compliant Special Forecast Report' and the call was promptly transferred to a GLO Clerk, who asked for credentials.

"Dorothy Everseed, licensed apprentice. Pass phrase: Spiral staircase, rhinoceros beetle, hydrangea, fallen huntsman, sleeping princess, blind retrograde, secret empress, vicious throne."

It took a moment to verify. There was some type of clicking and clacking on the other end. The clerk returned and said in an overly friendly way, "Thank you Miss Everseed. How is the Steward doing?"

Dorothy, exhausted and with thoughts clouded and perhaps some guilt hanging over her, spoke without thinking, "she passed away."

"Oh really? I'm sorry for your loss. We haven't received any notification about that."

She realized her mistake; there was no reason to tell the glowies anything she didn't need to. Although she would need to begin writing letters to her contacts in the Grand Old Coven to have herself officially affirmed as Steward. "I'm sure the paperwork will be along soon."

"Of course, of course. How may I help you today?"

"Could you put me through to your Special Meteorologist, I have something specific to request."

"What would that be?"

"Private," Dorothy said firmly.

The clerk did her job, and after a long wait a voice came on the line.

He was jovial but guarded, opening up with sarcastic bait to test her temperament. "Maxwell Evenfang. How can this humble working-witch help you?"

"By letting me thank you in advance. We witches get by with one another's help, after all." Dorothy would not look down on him just for working outside the coven, nor was she in position to do so.

He was satisfied and voice became sincere, "and what can I do for you, Miss Everseed?"

"Could you call me if there are any changes to our weather over the next couple months?"

"I could do that, is everything alright over there?"

"Yes, we're just working something very sensitive to fluctuations."

"Oh, something exciting?"

"I can't say, we have our secrets after all."

"I understand, I'll keep you posted."

Afterwards Dorothy had to rest for a while, regaining focus and rhythm. Next, she'd call Sherry and catch up, although she felt too tired to really care about anything going on. Luckily, Sherry had been saving many little things and began to ramble, gradually Dorothy let down the phone from her ear and it became comforting white noise as she drifted in and out of waking mind.

Wednesday Afternoon

"I'm glad we got to help her," said Lucile.

With Donna taken care of, they were ready to get back to their magic lessons, and now they were better equipped to progress.

Billie watched her shuffle with a playful flare. Thinking on what she just told the girl, he asked, "you know, I'm confused about what exactly you can learn from those cards."

"How so?"

"I don't know, you've mentioned a lot of rules, but it seems like you can figure out near anything you want."

She grinned, "there's a bit of interpretation involved."

"So you're making stuff up."

She got up, and together they began clearing away a circle. She said, "fate is woven from decisions, and I can feel the movement around them, the connections between. I felt her decision to ask for help, and it moved forward in a good way, so I'm guessing the man at the store is going to be nice to a little girl. I felt her decision to interact with a loved one, so I'm guessing things with her sister would be fine."

"Makes sense," He nodded. "You know, you're pretty good with kids."

"You think? I just did what I always do."

"I always worry I won't do the right thing around them."

"You did great with her, I wouldn't have thought to ask for help like that. It really made her day." Lucile grew curious, "why do you worry about it? Kids I mean."

Billie stopped and thought, "I guess it was something my dad said once. He had a fight with mom about me, I don't remember what it was about, but he said he 'didn't know what to do with me.'" He lost himself in the memory. He asked, "do you ever want kids?"

Lucile answered flatly, "I can't. I live on the road."

"Yeah, but if you could?"

And now it was her turn to slip into some solemn thought. "Maybe, but what if I didn't like them, what if I didn't want them anymore?" He nodded but didn't respond. She chirped up, "do want kids?"

"I assumed it would happen eventually, Marianne was ready to try. But now, I don't really know what I'm doing with my life."

"I get that. So, should we get started?"

And with their mood thoroughly stranged, they got to practice.

They moved tables and chairs apart to create an empty space in the middle of the room. Then Lucile took his hands for a proper breαth sharing jumpstart. Billie's skin broke into goosebumps.

"Do you feel any different?"

"Everything is tingly."

"Okay, that'll fade in a minute." Lucile pulled up a stool in the center and had him sit. "The name of the game is peekaboo. You'll keep your eyes closed, and I'll sneak somewhere around you. I'm going to give you the hardest glare I can and you have to say where I am and what I'm looking at."

"Shouldn't it be called hide and seek?"

"It's called witch's peekaboo and that's enough questions. You need to relax, focus, and wait for the feeling of someone watching you. Ready and go."

He was about to talk back but quickly shut his eyes. In the darkness he no longer heard her. She had been to his right, and surely she couldn't creep both swiftly and silently, she must still be there holding her breath. The quiet dragged on.

These past weeks had been bizarre, and while he had gradually come to accept what he was told about but could not see, times like this reminded him of that frustration. Waiting for some premonition with his eyes closed while she stood there watching him made him feel foolish. He thought back to his magical experiences so far, such as the tingling rush from moments ago, and the headaches that seemed to clenched him with rage. And then he remembered look of fear on her face.

"You're somewhere behind me."

"Try again," she said softly, dead in front of him.

Making guesses wasn't the point of this exercise, he knew that. Her footsteps went left before disappearing again.

"Behind me to the left."

"Try again," in front and to the left, "and also what part of you I'm looking at. There's the soft direction and the tingly point. You'll feel it." Her footsteps went left. Quiet.

"Behind me, my head."

"Okay, but more specific. You know what, take off your shirt. I need more places to look at, and you need more to be more open to the wiɳd."

Billie pulled off his shirt and puffed up his chest. He checked Lucile's eyes; she was glancing over him before making contact. She had a certain gleam in her eye, and he didn't know if that was magic or not. She looked away, so did he.

"Let's get back to work," she exclaimed.

"Right," he sat down and closed his eyes, still puffing up his chest. Quiet. He went with his instincts. "Behind me to the right at my neck."

"Try again," on the right, "And don't get frustrated, just relax."

He slapped his hands onto his knees and waited. Quiet. The clues from his other senses were hard to ignore, especially in favor of a sense he'd never used before. He never heard her move, so she had to still be somewhere to the right. He tried to wait for some other indication, playing the game the way he should, when suddenly a sort of tingle appeared on his right arm. It almost felt like it was graved by a breeze, but devoid of both touch and temperature. Confusing. But it seemed to move up towards his bicep.

"Are you looking at my arm?"

Footsteps to his right, "you didn't say which side."

He felt both pleased and annoyed that she didn't confirm it. Quiet. He felt something on his face, and reflexively wiggled his nose, "in front, my nose."

"You're getting the right direction, but wrong part. Try again." She paced around him a while, before disappearing on his left. It almost sounded like she'd gotten closer too.

Quiet, but something buzzy.

"Are you- are you staring at my earhole?"

She blew into his ear and he jumped away, his eyes had to get used to the light again, slowly letting him see the precarious posture she'd gotten into. She stood to the left on one foot's tippy toes, her other leg clear in the air as she bent over, holding onto the chair to brace herself from falling. She stretched as far as she could so as to hide her movement.

With a big smile on her face, "you did it. I thought if I got closer it would help, and the ears are sensitive too."

"Yeah, no kidding. Do you want to take a turn in the chair?"

"Nope. Come on, sit back down and we'll practice some more. This is actually really exciting, you're picking it up fast."

They made great progress, so much that they forgot the time and The Bartender slipped in without them noticing. "Are you two even able to explain what's happening right now?"

"Nope," they said in unison and swiftly returned the bar to its original state.

Then they struck up a conversation and helped get ready for opening in a vain attempt to have him forget the whole thing. They had dinner there and ultimately the evening was uneventful. Carlos never made an appearance.

When Billie got home, he sat down and the kitchen table with his notebook. He flipped past page after page of stilted limericks and personal notes, until he found a few untouched pages in the middle. He began writing down everything he had learned.

Thursday Morning

Early in morning, Billie looked over his finances in dread. For the moment, he was agitated with nothing to do about it. He took great deep breaths, which at first were soothing, but he put so much effort in that it became worse. The phone rang, and on the other end was Sean. A new discomfort mingled with the old. "Hey, Bill, ah, I heard you've been looking for work around town. You should come by today, I- I'm not giving you your job back, but I have something for you." The exchange was brief and stunted, but Billie agreed and jumped in his truck. They met outside the Law's now darkened house.

"I have something to say," said Billie immediately on approach.

Sean straightened up.

"I wasn't acting right. I was upset and I guess I expected everyone to just deal with it. I expected too much." The tension eased, Billie continued, "I'm still pissed about some of the things you said to me, but- sorry."

"I still don't want you around, but I'm sorry too," said Sean.

Billie had a strange weight lifted from him.

Sean led the way inside and said, "more important than being sorry, I thought it was right I show you this. I'm planning on moving in as soon as possible, but they left a lot of stuff. The furniture was part of the deal, but everything else- Do you want it? I don't feel right touching any of this."

Decorations, old kitchenware, clothes, boxes upon boxes of Christmas decorations, and what drew most of Billie's attention: photos. Some were gone, but Mrs. Law had many. It was inconceivable for her to leave them behind. He began looking through them, each happy memory had turned to burden, it began to overwhelm him and suddenly he understood. A photo of Marianne stuck out to him, one her from senior year. Still recognizable, but long enough ago that it carried none of the grief of the prior months. Even with the sunset illuminating her golden hair, it was her smile that captivated his heart.

He forced out the words, "I'll get it all packed."

After that they stepped outside to discuss logistics. He still had a key to the house and would take care of the designated items over the coming days.

Billie returned home to find Lucile waiting for him on the porch. "Thought we were meeting later?"

"I just didn't feel like setting up shop today," she said.

He sat down next to her, "I think I really screwed up."

"On what?"

"My mother-in-law, I think I should’ve been there for her." He explained his outing. "I should have, but I just couldn't. Didn't want to listen to her be nice to me. The way she was trying not to be sad. But I should have done it. If I want to keep people around, I can't put that much weight on them," Billie said, hunched over in thought.

After a somber moment, Lucile offered, "people hurt each other. It's bound to happen eventually."

"That's a cheery thought."

"But it's true. Maybe you did screw up, but you lost someone too. Sometimes people just don't match up; maybe they expected too much from you. There are some people you can't or shouldn't keep around."

"How do you tell the difference? You can't leave people the moment there's a problem."

"True." Lucile sat back, staring out into the morning sky, "but if you think things will keep going wrong, then you leave."

Billie stood up and turned to face her, "it's more than that. 'You only realize what you had, when it's gone,' right? All the little things, the conversations, the family dinners, the familiar faces," he stopped to clear his throat. "You lose everything you built."

"Yeah." She offered, perhaps to be encouraging, "but that it's easier said than done sometimes."

Thursday

They sat for a while. The clouds passed over head.

"Do you want some help with packing," she asked.

"You don't have to do that."

"Sure, but I am supposed to be helping you. We'll play peekaboo all day and I'll mess with you while you're working; make things a little harder."

He smiled, "thank you."

First, they needed to get boxes, and while Billie purchased them, Lucile snuck away with mischievous intent. From an alleyway she stared at him with maximum intensity. Initially he was baffled, putting the supplies in the truck and wondering where she'd gone. Then some instinct magnetically drew his attention to her and the chase began. She ran away cackling, sneaking around the building and finding spots to wait. Billie followed slowly at first, maybe annoyed, but also distracted from his dower morning. Gradually he sped up, spurred by a competitive hunger. Crossing back to the main road, he looked here and there frantically. But if he wanted to win, that wouldn't be good enough. He closed his eyes and left the wind filter out of his mind, till some other sensation appeared to his right, and there she was behind a car. She scurried into the knick-knack shop, and he lost her among the displays. The lady at the counter gave him a disapproving glare, and he felt like a teenager again, screwing around in places he shouldn't. He closed his eyes. Behind him, and so she was running out the door.

She was hightailing it to the truck, which by the laws of children's games was clearly home base. He sprinted and overtook her halfway across the street, but she'd slowed down at the end, and her eyes were clasped shut in pain.

"You got me," she said with a forced smile.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just gave myself a headache from staring too hard." She opened her eyes, watering, through which she saw his reaction. "I'm fine, these are just onion tears."

He chuckled and escorted her out of traffic.

They made it to the house and packed a fair amount, save for some odd items here and there that would need more attention. After she recovered Lucile resumed her games, this time less intense. She mixed things up when she found a pungent whispɛr in the bedroom closet. She gave it a toss at him, and he sat bolt upright, looking out the window.

"What?" He shook his head and said, "I'm going crazy, I thought I just heard my mother-in-law."

Lucile got excited and rushed to pick something up, "this little guy must have some of her. Your familiar so you might be extra sensitive to it! We should use this to practice more."

He didn't know what 'this little guy' in her empty palms was. However, that wasn't his objection, "Could we use a different one?"

She deflated and thought better of it, "Sure. Yes."

They kept on with the day, it was pleasant. They drove the first load back to his home. Although she was willing to help, he wanted a moment to be alone. she left him to it.

Thursday Evening

In the evening Lucile set up shop near the center of town, just in range of the bright neon signs of the hair salon to provide a little extra flair. Performing and chatting with the passersby was fun, but it didn't distract her from thinking for long. She'd never taught anyone before, but Billie was making progress. She began to wonder how it was that people learn magic, or why some many didn't. She didn't know, but if he kept going, he would eventually expel that eϛho from his body. And then she'd be able to leave, to go somewhere with new people and new fates to read. A little bittersweet, there was comfort in the familiar scenery, but she couldn't stay here forever. She couldn't stay anywhere forever. Could she?

Learning that kind of control wouldn't be so simple for him, of course. It could take years, although with training and assistance from a witch, he would be fine. But on the other hand, Lucile looked around, the town was unprotected. The domain's viscous strokes of red and yellow were limp and brittle. They dangled and streamed about at the whims of the wiɳd. She worried and thought about going to offer whatever help she could. She didn't go, instead read fate in the wiɳd. Something ominous was coming, and pain along with it.

Her last visitor appeared out of the sunset, marching sharply towards the table right as the activity of the street went into a lull. "Excuse me, are you Lucile?"

"I am Madam Delphina, travelling fortune teller!"

The woman was entirely unamused, and vaguely familiar.

"Yes, I'm Lucile. How can I help you," she asked as amicably as she could, gesturing to the seat across the table.

"I'm Cindy, Carlos's wife." The woman did not sit down. She spoke very pointedly, as if just stopping short of saying more, holding it in just behind her lips. "Was he with you Sunday night?"

"For cards, yes."

Cindy inhaled, smiled, and tiled her head with a predatory satisfaction. "And how much money did he lose?"

"Not as much as some of the others." Lucile tried to disarm her with humor. An error.

"Oh, that's good. Is making a living on gambling hard?"

“It's just a sometimes thing-"

"I'm sure it is. How do you like our town? Enjoying your stay?"

"Yes, I-"

"That's good. Well, I'll let you get back to it." And she was gone.

The fortune teller shuffled, grasping for any last scrap of the woman's breαth. To her dismay it was muddled, only leaving her with a sense of foreboding.

Friday Evening

Friday, Billie and Lucile agreed to meet for dinner and an evening training session, after he spent the day finishing the cleanup of the Law's old things. It was a very bland day, making the scene he walked in on all the more shocking.

All eyes in the bar were locked on the same point, to the half circle of three women crowding on around the counter. He tried to get a better look and found The Bartender's eye, who silently communicated urgency. A rancid feeling crept into the bottom of his stomach as he got closer. He found Lucile with her back pinned to the bar being accosted, half standing off her seat and tilted as though she'd been surprised.

"I said give the money back you whore," exclaimed leader of the women.

Billie eyes dilated, goosebumps charged up all along arms.

"I will, I will," stammered Lucile, "it was just for fun, for fun. I'll just go get it-"

"You're not going anywhere," said another, "cheating tramp."

Billie stamped his hand on the counter. The women startled. He looked to Lucile and said, "what's going on?"

"She cheated my idiot husband out of our money," said Cindy who began to launch into another tirade.

Lucile was looking for a way out, while her assailants and Billie began winding up. It was The Bartender coming around to pull her aside that ceased further escalation. He said, "She'll stay here with me. Bill."

"Right," said Billie, as he wedged past the women and whispered to Lucile, "where's your keys?"

She handed them over and set them in his hand, she was trembling. "The money's in the tin." She began to say more, but he assured her he'd handle it. He made his way out of the bar, painfully aware of everyone watching him, he could almost feel it on his skin. The last thing he saw was Carlos, squirming in his seat and avoiding eye contact.

It was hard to calm down jogging to the motel. He mistakenly tried the wrong room the first. He got in and rummaged through her bag. There really wasn't much in it, just a couple sets of clothes and under garments. He found the tin, and made sure the cash was inside. He jogged back.

The atmosphere was still quiet and sour, what little muttering there was ceased when he came in. Lucile wasn't to be found, but The Bartender emerged from the kitchen, shaking his head. Billie pulled the money out of the can and began counting as Cindy approached. The Bartender loudly declared, "you don't need to worry about me, I finished about even."

Billie looked at him in a split second of confusion but observed the slightest grin on the man's lips. Billie loudly said, "Carlos, how much did you lose again?"

All eyes turned on Carlos, pale as ghost, and when he answered Cindy erupted, evidently having been told it was less. They began to fight and thankfully for everyone else they left, and the other women along with them.

The Bartender announced, "Who can I get a drink?"

Everyone else had courtesy to say nothing further.

As the talking and drinking resumed Billie went into the kitchen to find Lucile holding herself, shrunken against the wall.

"How about I walk you home?"

Now, Then, and Tomorrow

"God, it's happening again." Lucile sit, practically fell, onto the edge of the bed.

Billie had walked her back, she was quiet the whole way, but more than once heard the slight whimper in her breathing. Now her face was buried in her palms, a meek silhouette in the dark just beyond the threshold of the motel room. He waited a moment, thinking to himself, perhaps about how he knew gambling was a bad idea, maybe wondering if she wanted to be left alone.

He entered, closed the door, and turned on the lights, "what is happening again?"

She was almost surprised that he was still there, and began looking down, away, anywhere but his eyes. Then she saw the bag despoiled on the bed beside her. Billie apologized and moved it out of the way, awkwardly aware he was disturbing her things even more. He made sure to zip up, hiding her underwear in some symbolic restoration of privacy.

"Nothing," said Lucile, her voice sobering. She said glibly, "I guess you were right, huh?"

"Honestly now I'm angry, I wish he'd lost more money." He waited but she had nothing else to say. He repeated, in a softer way, "what did you mean, what's happening again?"

The silence was dreadful, and Billie pieced together a dreadful idea. "Lucile, did you cheat?" Although she looked at him with horror he continued, "you can do that right? You spent all that time watching my breɑth for changes, is that how-"

"I didn't cheat. I don't need to when you don't know how to play." Her voice sharp, defensive.

"Okay," he said, "okay, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Because there was nothing else he could do, because perhaps he should have kept his suspicion to himself, maybe it was all he had because she wouldn't give him anything else. He turned to leave and just above the noise of the opening door he heard her voice offer him something.

"Getting bullied, when I was a kid, that's what I meant was happening again."

After a pause he eased back into the room, not quite committing to the question, "do you want to talk about it?"

"No. I'm a big girl, I've cried enough. It's just-" She did want to talk about it, and once she started she couldn't stop. And Billie listened, not really responding. If he cared or if he was uncomfortable, it didn't really show.

"My mother was a failure, and aspirant assistant never good enough to be a witch. I grew up watching my her serve Lady Minervia Evenfang. The other kids never let me forget that. Iris, the Lady's second daughter, we grew up together, said things like, 'you'll get farther than your mom, we'll apprentice together.' It was suffocating, I had a hard time keeping up. My mom used her savings to send me to the coven school out in the woods on the other side of Montana. A chance to get a better education than the bare minimum, to do better than she did. The last thing she shared with me was my grandmother's fate reading, and I loved it, I loved these stupid cards."

Lucile, discomforted by the deck box digging into her side, ripped it off her belt and threw it at the pillows. It slammed into the headboard and popped open, spilling cards onto the bed. She was startled at what she'd done, but with no energy to move, left it alone.

"But things weren't better at school, they were worse. I didn't make new friends, I was teased. I was just some no-name. In classes I was humiliated, unable to keep up and in private when I asked for help, I was berated by my teacher, 'you have to try, it won't kill you.' I was trying. I was. I started spending more time alone in the cabin, started reading that old book my mom gave me, just to remind myself of her. I played around with the cards she gave me, and I felt Fate respond. So, I studied grandma's book, not like going to class taught me anything. When the others found out they mocked me. One of them took a pen and started writing things in it,

fake instructions, mocking my family's notes, doodling. I took it to Lady Morgana, and she didn't help me. She took the book away. I never got it back.

"I was trapped there, in the middle of the forest for years. Tried to keep my head down, stay out of sight. I cracked when this boy, some special kid visiting from Salem, said, 'you're the servant girl aren't you?' It was small but it crushed me. That's what I was to them, and they all knew it. I ran, left everything, and hitchhiked back home. God, that was dangerous.

Lucile began to choke up. "And you know what my mom did? She screamed at me and told me to go back. Lady Evenfang was there, said she would write a letter for us. I don't know if my mother was more worried about me or being embarrassed. I ran again, and that was the last time I saw her."

She stifled her tears and sniffled her composure back into place. "And sometimes I wonder how much of it was my fault. That's what's happening again: me being a failure."

Billie said, "You're not a failure. You should get some rest." He stood to leave once more.

"I can't afford this room anymore," she said to herself.

"It'll be okay, I'll see you tomorrow," he said, not as empty consolation.

Lucile awoke early and couldn't bring herself to move. Her skin itched from the clothes she'd never taken off. She'd need to visit the front desk before checkout time, and the minute hand just kept on ticking. There was a tapping at her door, and Billie called to her from outside. Detached, she just followed along, checking out of the motel, and loading her things into the truck. Driving across a thought finally crossed her mind. "No, I can't ask Dorothy for help."

He smiled and assured her, "you don't have to." Without further elaboration, they arrived at his home, and he promptly carried things inside. The living room was clogged with boxes. He led her to a small guest room. Some things had been packed against the wall it was otherwise clear. He presented to her an air mattress and a key.

"I've got the spare bedding in the washer right now. We'll get that set for you. I can get more of this out of the way too."

She was taken aback, "I can't stay here, it's-"

"I promise I'll respect your privacy."

"No, that's not what I mean-"

"You're not planning on leaving yet are you?"

She didn't know what she planned.

"You can stay here for now and worry a little less."

"Are you sure?"

He shook his head, "I thought about spotting you some money, but no job. It's fine, at least till next month. We still have a problem to solve; don't you want to see your hard work pay off?"

"Thank you."

The Weather Report

Friday evening, Dorothy sat underneath the Tree of Murmurs with the cold dew of many mornings still clinging to her paling skin. Her legs were asleep, numb from disuse; she must have been in this same position for days. She'd finally found a rhythm and couldn't afford to break it. The leaves rustled every now and then, and she was grateful to tree for keeping her mind from slipping off beyond the wall of sleep.

The phone rang and she responded automatically, but each movement and word would cost her aching and dizziness in the moments after. "This is Dorothy."

"Hey there Ms. Everseed, it's Maxwell with the weather center. I'm just about to head home for the weekend, and I thought I'd give you a warning like you asked. From what I'm looking at, there's going to be a storm coming your way and maybe, this is just a hunch cause I've seen this pattern before, maybe there's going to be a disjointed æther system following behind it. I don't know how sensitive your work is, but it shouldn't be anything a steward can't compensate for with a domain."

"Thank you."

"Sure thing! Don't forget about me if your project turns into a big success."

"Goodbye." She called out to Becky, who also seemed at wit's end.

"I need you to go for a walk around the perimeter and check all the old charms. Take a backpack, and bring any that are worn or broken."

She gave a halfhearted 'okay' and turned to leave is huffy manor.

"Becky, I promise things will get better soon. Thank you for your help."

The girl stopped, "do you need anything before I leave?"

"Breakfast."

"It's dinner time."

"Anything."

As her little head assistant brought her a sandwich and water, Dorothy realized, "wait, its dinner time? You can start tomorrow, don't go out this late."

Becky went to look after Donna and rest. Dorothy sighed, ever worried of what her choices were doing to the girls. "We do what we must," and with that she returned to her work beneath the tree and above the mound. Then the headache set in; she would have grit her teeth, but even that effort would only exacerbate things further.

Saturday Afternoon

Lucile was trapped in a new kind of prison, subjected to the scrambling noise of her host outside the guest room. He left her to settle in, before dashing to and fro, cleaning what? She did not know. It had been a long time since she'd shared a home with someone. Certainly, she'd heard all manor disturbing things through the walls of Inns across the states, but this was different. She reorganized her things and eventually the energy returned to her, and with nothing to do she began shuffling.

Billie knocked. Granted entry, he leaned inside, craning his neck to look at her on the bed pressed to the same wall as the door. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm getting there."

He smiled and nodded. "Listen, I'm going to pick up some groceries, and then I'm thinking about driving up to meet my dad; he might have work for me at the shop. You need anything before I get moving?"

"Actually Billie," and then Lucile shifted from worried to preventative, "you might need to talk to Dorothy first."

He got the sense that she hadn't told him something.

Donna answered the door and immediately let them in without thinking. Becky was apparently off on a mission. Into the secret courtyard, they found Dorothy covered in shimmering shadows and otherwise naked. Lucile was unbothered. Billie, however, had a hard time looking away, maybe because he was surprised, totally because he was surprised, but his companion grabbed his by the shoulders the twisted him away. He closed his eyes to be polite. Donna crawled ahead and gently nudged the witch. Dorothy opened her eyes and looked them up and down, no energy to fuss, "sit."

Lucile noted the large mound of twisted tree roots and moss where there had been none before. And beneath it, the subtle undulations of the gnawing things, and the absence the prior steward, and stench of death and filth.

"What brings you," asked Dorothy.

As Lucile was giving a report on their progress, Billie sat with his eyes covered, trying to understand the feeling in the air. There was a odor and the night air lingered under the branches, it was cold and humid, but there was some other viscosity he couldn't identify.

She finished, "so, I wanted to meet with you about what to do next."

Dorothy gathered her thoughts, and spoke deliberately, "Bill, you are now a ward of our coven. I won't let you wander off. You could be a danger or an embarrassment."

He was shocked, "what do you mean? You can't just-" but Lucile's hand soothed his arm. His thoughts turned, "how come she gets to roam around?"

Lucile almost gasped but held quiet as if the witch might just forget she was there.

"Because no one has stopped her," said Dorothy. "But that ends now. She lied to me and disobeyed. If she leaves, I will have her arrested." She took a moment to rest, collecting her thoughts once more. "You'll both work for me now, because I need your help. There is a storm coming and problems will follow. The girls will see to the chores. You two will watch over things."

Lucile assured Donna that they'd get to look over more tarot cards soon. She caught up to Billie heading for the truck. "You are so childish, why would you throw me under the bus like that," she demanded.

He fired back, "why didn't you tell me I was trapped here? Because I have this thing inside me, I'm a slave now?"

Billie walked, in a circle, holding his head and looking all around at nothing for a solution to miraculously appear. Lucile backed down, she knew that to him this was all new and horrifying, and she could see it. Along his neck and shoulder porcelain fingers crept over to console him and pulse a rancid charge across his breαth

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't want you to worry. You'll be able to leave one day, I'm sure. At least to see your family. But if you ever wanted to leave the coven, you'd have to get your memory wiped, or sign a contract, or maybe join the GLO."

He stood quietly, and the hand of the eϛho slipped away. He didn't say anything on the ride home, and they spent the day apart. Lucile thought twice before leaving her room, at least until she heard him leave and watched him jog up the road. Near dinner time he asked if she wanted a sandwich. While cleaning up the kitchen he finally said, "at least we're getting paid." There was a certain tone in his voice, as though he was firmly insisting this was a new topic with no prior connection.

She responded in her own, a sort of faux pleasantness but still tense underneath, "yeah, at least there's that."

"When this is over, do you think Dorothy will let you go?"

"I don't why she'd keep me around. Maybe she'll report me to the coven."

"Hmm, I'll talk to her," he said quietly, but moved on to the next topic, "what's the plan? What's going to happen?"

"I'm not sure, but it sounds like things are going to get weird. Foreign soμnds are going to come in with the storm, if we're lucky people will just be on edge for a while, but people get a little crazy, or get hurt, or even suffer from wiɳd intoxication."

"I take it I'll be a goffer, and you'll be telling fortunes, waiting to find weird stuff?"

Lucile's eyes drifted low, "I'm not sure I can do any good reading fate, I might as well just patrol with you, or maybe talk to Sherry, she seems like she'll hear about things."

Billie finished putting away some mugs. He said, "you could talk to Sherry, but there's a lot of time in the day. If you set up in the middle of town you'll hear things that way too. And if people start having weird dreams and hearing scary noises, I think they'll want to talk to a fortune teller now more than ever, don't you think? Or the pastor. Sherry's going to have heyday with all this."

Billie looked at Lucile and made sure she was listening. She was but didn't seem ready to respond. He said, "anyways, you should set up shop, it's what you're good at right?"

"So, you'll run errands then?" She smiled, "and you could hang out and we could practice in between customers, and maybe if we got your senses a little sharper you could even go patrolling."

"Sounds like a plan."

Flip & Fate, Episode 1: Ten Cups isn't Enough

Lucile was posted at her table, and the clouds had rolled in over the night. The morning was dreary and cold, but that didn't bother her once she readied a thin layer of insulating breαth over her skin, although it wouldn't protect her cards from the wind and rain. She didn't shuffle, just stared at her deck, as muted as the town.

An unfortunately familiar car parked nearby, and Cindy emerged. "Tell me, how long are you going to be cluttering up the sidewalk?".

Lucile didn't so much as change her expression, "a while."

"Well, that's good news." Cindy waited for a reaction.

"Would you like your fortune-"

"How do you even make money doing this? I guess you don't, you can't even afford a coat sitting out here in the cold. Is that why you swindle people at cards?"

Shuffling, defiant shuffling. "Swindle? It was supposed to be friendly game, ask your husband, he seemed to have a lot of fun playing with me. You could sit down, the cards can tell us exactly when your marriage started falling apart."

Cindy stepped back, nostrils flaring. She scoffed thrice, each one stronger and more performative than the last, stuttering forth a suitable rebuttal. "No thank you, I have to get back to our shop. You wouldn't know anything about running a legitimate business, would you? Or a marriage."

Billie growled, "she's still on it? Are you okay?" He took a seat, setting down a brown paper bag on the table. As he observed Lucile's demeanor his anger faded.

She slumped in her seat, more exhausted than upset. "yeah, I'm fine."

He eventually said, "I brought you some food, I saw you didn't eat this morning."

"Thank you."

Evidently, she was in a poor mood, although the exact cause wasn't apparent to him. "Can I ask the cards how to get her off your case?"

"That's not how it works," she smiled.

"I know, I know. Do you want to go for a walk?"

Along the main road, Billie went ahead and stowed her cart at the house. Lucile lagged lethargically behind. They kept going, but when he couldn't slow his pace any further, he prodded, "you okay? Do you need help if Cindy keeps bothering you?"

She answered, "there's nothing I can do. Besides, I think it's best if I stop causing trouble."

The statement felt bittersweet to him. After a while they came towards church, with the morning service over some people were about here and there talking. Billie stopped at the beginning of the yard, at loss of what to do. Maybe they should turn and go up to check on the girls, but then Sherry spotted them, and they were ensnared.

In a blur they were pulled inside the church kitchen and Sherry began to enlighten them, mostly Lucile, on all sort of things. Poor Sherry was quite pent up without her best conversation partner, and when that topic of Dorothy came up they had to quickly improvise excuses as to why they'd been seen visiting, while Sherry wasn't allowed inside.

Billie said, "that was my fault. I had a question I needed to ask her about Marianne, and after that I started helping out a little."

Sherry pouted but didn't say anything, perhaps being considerate of his feelings. "Well, here's hoping she gets better soon. Speaking of getting better, Lucile! Why are you so down today?"

And that led them into a very long conversation going over every juicy detail the Cindy situation, of which Sherry had heard plenty, but she wanted it from the source. With every explanation and reflection she coaxed out, she would comment, "well that’s his own fault," and supportively gush, "oh honey." They detoured into an interrogation about their shared living situation, of which she savored every word. But then Lucile explained that morning's conflict, and when all was said and done, she began to straighten up and her answers to Sherry's questions more lively; it was no longer a one sided conversation.

Sherry sat back as though she'd finished a great meal, "you know you could have come to the church if you were having money trouble, we don't have money, but I could have taken you for a while. Well, I'm glad things are looking better for you." Her eyes darted back and forth between the two of them, both stoically resisted looking at each other. Sherry gave up, "one more thing, don't hate Cindy too much. This attitude has been a recent thing."

"How recent," Lucile asked, unconsciously pulling out her cards.

"I thought you said you weren't going to cause any more trouble," said Billie, following Lucile back towards the neighborhood.

She waved goodbye to Sherry as she said, "why do you think I'm causing trouble?"

"I think I've developed a sense for it."

"People have only noticed Cindy and Carlos having issues recently, and the domain has been down for weeks. Something might be agitating them, and we should go investigate, right?"

"Or! Their marriage is in slump."

"I just want to look around."

"How is this going to make you feel better? If you fix something magic, it's not like Cindy will know."

Lucile stopped, "if there's something I can do, then I'll be the one that fixed their marriage, and I'll get to feel really smug about it. Besides, you'll know."

Billie shook head and led the way.

Carlos and Cindy Costillo had modest a home, as did most people in Atomic Springs, but with the notable addition of a basement. It sat pressed between the bottom of the cemetery hill cliffside, and the mechanic shop's large brick garage. While they had an absolutely abysmal view, there was plenty of space for their dog, Scoodles, to run around. After a brief conversation with a neighbor, who was preparing his shutters for the coming storm, Lucile learned that the dog hadn't been in the back yard for several days. Cindy had been taking it out front on a leash. The neighbor was delighted that the obnoxious yapper hadn't been darting back

and forth along the fence accosting anything that moved and asked Cindy why in the hopes that it might be permanent. Apparently, Scoodles started acting scared of the back yard recently, reason unknown.

Lucile examined the backyard from the road.

"See anything," Billie asked.

"I wonder if we could get in to check the dog," she thought aloud.

"We are not breaking into their house."

"Maybe she loves the dog more than him, drives him away."

"Okay, how about we go get some food and check on the girls?"

"Hey," shouted Cindy, likely on a lunch break, exiting the home with her dog. "What are you doing here?"

"Just going for a walk," replied Lucile. "I heard you're having trouble with your dog, want me to read your fortune; I could tell you what's wrong."

"Get off my property before I call the deputy, you freak."

Cindy tugged at the leash, but Scoodles wouldn't leave the front steps, transfixed on Billie. Lucile took notice and gave the dog a magician's handshake. The dog startled and rushed behind Cindy's legs, snarling at the two of them. Billie thought to pull Lucile away but she pulled his arm and started them up the road. She still had that look in her eye. They hiked up to the cemetery and took in the view.

"I wish you could see this," she said, "actually, maybe it's better you don't."

All across the town the domain laid limp over trees and buildings, threatening to tear at any moment. Dull color ebbed in place of what should have been a pulsing aurora of the Steward's protection.

"Is something bad going to happen," he asked.

"Maybe. It won't be the end of the world, but if cold air makes you cold, then getting hit with a storm of chaotic wiɳd will people a little crazy. Even without that, who knows what's wandered into town recently. Let me look around for a bit."

Billie took some time to visit Marianne's grave, while Lucile investigated the area. He caught her watching from aways off. "I'm good," he said, and she smiled.

Not long after Lucile pulled something invisible from a tree and began wrestling with it. "Hold still," she said while walking nearer. Billie met her halfway, and she instructed, "training for the day, try to touch this guy."

He smirked but complied, reaching towards the space between her struggling arms. Suddenly Lucile yelped and fell back onto her butt. Billie pulled back looking around for a screech whose source he couldn't find.

"He did not like you," she said, "did you feel it?"

"Maybe," he helped her up, "what was that about?"

"That was groɷls and a feisty one too. The last time I was here there were mδans, little graveyard watchers, and now they're all gone. I think they were chased away by a new territorial groɷls. And right at the bottom of the hill is Cindy's house."

He resisted rolling his eyes, "is there any way to prove they went there?"

"Fortune teller's intuition," she answered. "Here, let's practice one more time with our groɷls friend and-what happened?!" Lucile knelt over a spot just feet away and looked back at him as though he'd ran over a puppy. "It's melted, falling apart. You killed it."

"Don't look at me like that, you told me to touch it." Billie protested but started to wonder if he was imagining the strange discoloration in the grass beside her.

"You didn't do it, but your passenger did."

Walking back down, Lucile had gone silent and crossed her arms. Finally, she said, "I'll give up for now."

"Are you okay? I get being pissed about someone talking to you like that," said Billie.

"I've dealt with worse. I can't be starting any more problems, and we need to focus on magic issues."

He nodded.

Just as they came to the house, they found Carlos standing outside. He noticed and waved them over. "Hey Lucile, listen I," he stammered, "I'm real sorry about Cindy. She can be pretty bull headed. You weren't planning on running another game, were you?"

"No, the game is canceled," she said flatly.

"Right, right. Good. I'm glad we learned our lesson."

Billie said, "we?" But he was ignored.

Carlos continued, "could I ask you for favor? Could you avoid riling her up for a while?"

Billie inhaled sharply but Lucile stopped him from saying anything. She said, "only if you do me a favor first."

"So, Carlos, what's the story with the dog?" Lucile shuffled nonchalantly across the desk. They needed a private place to speak, and so they muscled their way into Carlos's office at the back of Costillo's Castellas. The man across from her was fully boxed with Billie standing over them, his face and eyes unlit by the hanging lamp.

"Scoodles, oh he's fine- here why don't I just open the window." Carlos began fidgeting around.

"Answer the question, Costillo." Billie cut him off.

Carlos sat back down, "He just won't go out when I open the door. I think he got scared of a racoon, he's such a little guy."

"Anything else," asked Lucile.

"He barked at the door to the basement in the night, but I checked and there's no openings for a racoon. It was about a week ago."

"And how have things been between you and your wife?"

"Fine."

"Fine?" Lucile splayed the deck upon the desk, "Carlos, would you put a hand on the cards for me."

"What? Why-"

"Put your hands on the cards, Carlos." Billie loomed in the dark.

She waited patiently for him to comply and suddenly locked eyes. In a fake gentle tone, she asked, "Carlos, why didn't you want your wife to know about the poker game?"

"Because she's against gambling."

Lucile and swept the cards up from up his fingers suddenly, he startled. She shuffled and lifted just one, showing it to Billie with a glance over her shoulder. "That's a lie, Carlos. Why didn't you tell your wife?"

"Because I broke a promise," he blurted. "Because I promised to save money until we could afford a new sign.

Lucile dealt another card, "that's the truth."

"Good," said Billie.

"And? Don't you care about getting a new sign, Carlos?"

"Cindy, she wants a new everything! I can't care about everything. She wants to try new recipes, buy new equipment, it's all the time. We don't make enough to do everything I tell her. We have to just stick to what works and wait."

"Why do you think she wants all these things?" Lucile began shuffling again as Carlos gradually became more agitated.

"I think she's bored. At first running our shop was great, but it's the same thing every day there's always little problems, but there's nothing I can do. I wasn't thrilled either, but she refuses to relax."

"But you relax, don't you Carlos. What else do you do beside gamble?"

"I do some reading; I have my hobbies."

"And how much do those hobbies cost you?"

Carlos got quiet.

"So more than Cindy's okay with. How long have you and Cindy been having problems?"

"Just recently."

"Are you sure," Lucile asked eagerly.

Carlos stared at her, and then looked away, "Scoodles wakes Cindy up in the night. She has to take him out to potty. She says there's noises in the basement, but I tell her I cannot find anything. She's not sleeping. And then our fight. Just recently."

Lucile pulled a card off the top of the deck and glanced up at Billie.

He raised an eyebrow, although he didn't know what the card meant, and asked, "is that all we need?"

"One more thing," again she forced Carlos to place a hand upon the cards. "Do you want to know when the problems when your beloved will start getting better?"

"Yes, I guess."

"Ask, in your own words."

"Do it," said Billie.

"When will Cindy get over me gambling?"

Lucile dealt out a cross array of five cards, slipped her hands over it once and promptly scooped them all up and started for the door.

Carlos called out, "what about my fortune?"

Billie shouted back, "you have a customer!"

Billie asked, "so what do you think?"

Lucile stowed her deck away. "They're in a spat right now, but the problems have been building for a while, he didn't want to admit it. Scoodles is wiɳd sensitive, he's started acting strange recently, and Carlos didn't find any animals. Last but not least, I couldn't read his fortune. Which means that I'm involved in the answer to his question, so I need to go look around their backyard, maybe the basement."

"There is no way Cindy is going to let you do that."

"I know."

"You're starting trouble again."

"I have too. Fate says so."

"No no no. Fate is made of decisions, so you already decided you wanted to look around. If you decided to leave things alone, maybe you could have read his fortune."

Lucile mouth hung open, caught in her own game.

"That's right," said Billie, "I've been paying attention; don't act like the cards are making you do this."

She crossed her arms, "fine. I'm still upset about Cindy, and I really want to be right about soɱnds disturbing the dog. You don't have to come."

He sighed, "I do actually, I think I do."

"Great! Let's come back tonight."

"With that all said, are you hungry, I'm starving," asked Billie.

"I might eat something," said Lucile.

After spending the afternoon cleaning up and cooking for the girls, Lucile and Billie returned home, as did everyone in Atomic Springs. Great storm clouds had rolled in, and because of the darkness it cast, and for churning of the wind, and for pitter patter of rain, no one noticed two hooded figures walking a long winding path through the neighborhood. And then the figures arrived at the Costillo's home under the cliff. One spent little effort lifting his legs over the fence, the over had to lift and roll over the top. They sunk low, and large one followed the small one around the perimeter of the yard.

Thunder rumbled in the clouds above. Lucile gasped quietly, and Billie strained to see. She whispered, "would you believe me if I said I just saw a moan go through that cellar door?"

"You're the expert," Billie replied.

"Great, because we're going in."

Before he could protest, Lucile whipped out skinny spring-loaded knife and approached the doors.

"Where did you get that," he hissed.

"I've had it the whole time."

"What, you can't cut the lock."

"You don't need to," she said, she slotted the blade into the keyway, and with a little jiggle the lock popped open. They slipped inside as quietly as possible.

"Where did you learn to pick locks?"

"From someone I knew a long time ago." Lucile snuck forward, leaving Billie in the dark, before realizing he couldn't see. She grabbed his hand and led him along. Lucile scanned around and found nothing. The basement was unfinished and nearly empty, save for the water heater and some boxes. The only thing of note was a room built into the corner. She led Billie inside. "Nothing but stagnant whispɛrs," she reported when safely behind the closed door. She pulled the light chain, and they saw what secrets Carlos had been keeping secret.

There was a cozy chair in the corner, and all around it were shelf after shelf of books and magazines, numerous figurines, and enshrined was the cassette player with accompanying rows upon rows of radio plays on tape. The bulk of which belonged to the same weird-west series as the poster that read, "Ace of Bullets: when the money runs out, he gambles with his life!"

"Wow," said Billie. "I think my dad had some of these. Carlos likes the classics. Oh hey!"

"What?" Lucile stopped dead, just about to manhandle a toy on the shelf.

"That's probably a collector's item, don't mess with it."

"It's just a doll."

"Don't touch a man's figurines."

She rolled her eyes and resumed her search. Billie took a moment to appreciate the organization of the collection. Then Lucile crouched and suddenly squealed, "I knew it!" she began rummaging under a painted bull's skull in the corner. In the periphery of Billie's vision, he saw her arms full of large squirming rats. He yelled. Both of them froze immediately and they heard movement on the floor above. Billie looked again to find she held nothing he could see.

"What are we gonna do," she hissed.

Billie squeezed by and parted the curtain, revealing another window well. He struggled to get it open; the seal was caked with dust. They could hear the basement door open, Carlos and Cindy shout down the stairs, and Scoodles barking like mad.

The window jerked open, just wide enough to get out, but Lucile said, "I can't climb like this."

"Come here, I got you." Billie hoisted her at the hips with surprising ease, he almost slammed her head into the top of the window seal.

Lucile squeezed out and Billie nervously waited for her to vacate the well. Suddenly she exclaimed, "no! come back," and clamored up into the backyard. He began fighting his way through the window, with a pounding on the door behind him. He scrambled out of the window well and around the corner of the house.

Carlos's voice yelled out behind him, "Hey! Who's there?!"

Billie nearly collided with Lucile, wrangling the mδans into her arms.

There was an eternal second of fear passing between them waiting to know what would happen next. Then to their relief, they heard Cindy's shrill voice demand, "when did you get all on this?!"

Cindy cried, "I can't believe you! What about me? You're only thinking about yourself."

Carlos scoffed, "I do, but you never stop! I'm not doing this right now, I'm calling the sheriff's office."

But before Cindy could fire back, a woman's voice shouted from outside, "no!"

They yelled angrily together, "who's there?!"

Lucile lowered her voice and grunted, "lady, you need to stop taking your problems out on other people, they won't take it forever."

Billie followed suit in a high pitch affect, "and you, sir, need to man up and stop running away from your problems."

"Now kiss and make up!"

"You both want your shop and marriage to be successful, right?"

The wind filled the tense silence, and then Carlos erupted, "screw you, thief! I'll gut you!"

Lucile shot towards the fence and Billie scrambled to replace the lock on the cellar door. Just as he clicked it closed the door bashed outwards and hurt his fingers, but it was secure. Lucile was struggling to get over the fence with her arms full, and Billie grabbed her and nearly tossed her clean over. On the other side they found their footing and heard shouts growing louder. Together they skedaddled up the street.

Lucile returned the mδans to their home atop the cemetery hill. She went towards the cliff to stand with Billie. He held his face in his hands, watching through his fingers as the deputy took a statement from the Costillo Couple below. The flashing lights surely drawing all the neighbors' eyes.

"I made trouble again."

"Yup, we did."

"Do you think we helped?"

"Maybe. What was his fortune supposed to be again?"

Lucile grinned, "when will my wife get over the gambling."

Billie lit up, "oh she's over it now!"

They laughed together and then set out on a long walk in the dark.

"Marriage is hard on people," said Lucile, unprompted.

"Oh? I don't think it has to be," said Billie.

"Well not for you," she said before pausing, checking his expression. He wasn't disturbed, so she finished in a mildly sarcastic way, "Marianne was perfect. But just imagine being trapped with someone like Cindy or Carlos."

"She was, but that shouldn't matter if both people are supporting each other. They'll figure it out, hopefully." He waited a while, but she had no response, maybe she didn't want to listen or perhaps she was just lost in thought. He changed topic, "I didn't realize how skinny you were."

She scoffed, "what do you mean skinny? I'm not skinny."

"No like light, I mean light. I almost hurt you in the window."

"Yeah, you did."

They went down the back side of the hills and around so they wouldn't be caught. The wind and rain picked up drowned out their banter. They arrived home ragged and shivering, but with a certain contentment.

This Decision

On the walk home under the storm, Lucile mentioned to Billie, "you know, it might not be over. I thought a saw some strangeness in Cindy's breɑth, but I wasn't sure."

"Is she going to be okay?"

"She'll live, but if it progresses into wiɳd intoxication life will get miserable for her."

"Can you fix it?"

"Me?" Lucile was surprised. "I don't know the spell."

"Can we ask Dorothy?"

She went quiet.

"Can we ask Dorothy."

"It's embarrassing! It's one of the most basic things and I don't know it." He began to give her a look, and she insisted, "I'll keep an eye on things. Find out for sure first."

"You should give her a chance. I can't see her holding it over you, that's not the kind of person she is." Then he questioned himself and added, "granted I guess there was a lot I didn't know, but still. Marianne never had a bad word to say about her, maybe she's a bit too serious."

"I'll think about it."

"Alright."

She did think about it. Over the coming days she found an opportunity to pop her head into Costilla's Castellas and confirmed Cindy's wiɳd intoxication. She also took note of similar symptoms appearing in many people around town. She never asked Dorothy how to fix it.

Flip & Fate, Episode 2: and Temperance Buried It

Lucile sipped orange juice while surveying the storm's destruction out the window. Evidently there were many trees in town that could have used pruning. Branches were scattered everywhere, jutting out from under a thin blanket of white snow as dark twisted spikes. What had burgeoned beyond its limits was tempered by the storm. She didn't see any damage on the neighboring houses, but surely someone's car got scratched.

"Alright, how many eggs you want," Billie announced cheerfully.

"What? No, no I'm not hungry. Thank you though."

"You gotta eat breakfast, it's good for you."

They stared each other down, Lucile folded. "I could have one."

Billie served her a plate, "and a piece of toast!"

He made a plate for himself and practically inhaled his food and set about cleaning the kitchen. Before Lucile had a chance to get up, he took her plate and asked, "hey do you need more of those boxes moved out of the room? I was thinking I could rearrange my closet for now."

"That's alright, I have enough space."

"Alright. Is there anything I can do? Today, I mean. What can I do to help with- whatever is coming."

"Oh it's already here," said Lucile. "It's about ankle deep right now, a layer of miasma dripping out of the wiɳd. When you go out today, keep your senses as open as you can. Other than that, we wait for problems to come to us. Do you have any hobbies you can work on?"

"I used to. I wasn't good at it though."

"What was it?"

"Nothing."

She shifted in her seat and slid her deck out of the case.

Billie noticed and said, "I'm kind of jealous of you and you're cards. I know you do it for work but its cool that you're good at something."

She blushed, and for a split second forgot to start shuffling.

"You know what, "I'm going to clean up some of those branches and go check on the girls. Do you want to come?" He went to put on his boots.

Lucile tapped the deck and considered her options. Maybe the cold would draw people to the hot springs, she could set up her table and keep an eye on the town. She called after him, "yeah I'll come. Be out in a bit."

Donna found her on the floor outside the bathroom, Becky had collapsed in the night. The elder sister had reached her limit, and now the younger was struggling to take her place. Lucile stepped in and calmed things down. First there was tending to Dorothy ,who said, "forget about the potions, I'll do what I must." All that was left was to handle food, water, the occasional cold towel for Becky's fever.

"Am I useful," Donna asked.

"Of course you are," said Lucile.

Donna tried to reply, but the words crumbled into tears.

Billie stood by the entrance to the girls' bedroom, fidgeting with a coin in his hand. He could hear a fuss from the kitchen, but all he could do was stay posted. A sickly groan came to his attention. Becky pointed at him with her eyes lost in dreams. She said, "I can be useful, don't be mad." Her arm went limp again.

He tucked her back in and said, "no one expects you to do anymore. Just rest."

There was no telling if she heard.

Lucile helped Donna situate in caring for her older sisters, both of them, and soon indulged her in learning more about tarot cards. Billie took to handling repairs and cleaning and yardwork with zeal. When the mail came, Dorothy sent them to cash the stipend. Billie and Donna returned. Lucile welcomed them back with a smile and the little one handed her a hefty envelope.

"Are we splitting this," Lucile asked.

"No this is yours," Donna said, leaving to go check on her sister.

Lucile's eyes widened thumbing through the bills.

"I know, I was surprised too," said Billie.

Lucile ravenously squirreled away the money, before recomposing herself. She leaned in, "is she feeling better?"

"A little bit, just wish we knew what to do next," he said, taking a seat, his knee bouncing and his fingers turning over his coin.

The day was uneventful. Billie eventually began more work outside, even going over to the neighboring houses and helping with their own post-storm messes. After dinner he put his shoes back on.

"Why don't you take a break? You've been at it all day," said Lucile.

"It's fine, I need to do something," he said.

Then there was a knock on the door. They opened it to find a little boy, who seemed to expect someone else. Donna popped up behind them and said, "hello, Daniel."

"Hello. Have you heard my cat," he asked, and with some prodding he explained, "He went missing but I hear him, I think he's lost. I just heard him earlier."

"I don't think so," she said.

As Daniels eyes began to sink, Billie tried to interject, "we could try to-"

But Donna erupted waving hands, and hardly able to finish the thought, "wait, Lucile, you!"

Lucile smiled and invited the boy inside. Moments later on the floor of the living room, the deck was shuffled the question asked. She let Donna lay out the cards with some instructions, then ran her fingers over the boy's fate.

"As it would happen, you'll hear the meowing again very soon, and if you follow it this issue will be put to rest, but-" Lucile trailed off, her face shifting in discomfort. The children didn't notice, however. Donna offered to help look and Daniel agreed, she tried to stall them, but both were out the door.

"What's wrong," asked Billie.

"Daniel's going to get angry at her, I need to do more readings but they're leaving," Lucile was flustered, beginning to shuffle again. Her frustration was infectious.

He watched at the doorway as Donna trotted along excitedly. "Hmm, well at least we have something to do. Let's go keep an eye on her."

"No we can't go. I read her fortune and now I've told you. We're not involved. If we go and interfere there will be consequences, fate does not tolerate being cheated."

Billie leaned against the door and turned his coin over in his hands, "so you see people's future but you can't change it?"

She pouted, "that's my life as fortune teller I guess."

"If you read that someone was going to get run over by a car the moment they left your table, the Lucile I know would try to stop them. She'd probably lie and scheme to make it happen," he stopped to grin and check her frustrated expression. He continued, "but she'd try."

Lucile stopped shuffling, struggling to respond. "Maybe, but fate is made of decisions, and ours don't cross with-"

"What if I'm not the one making the decision," Billie abruptly flipped the coin into the air. This time it was he that put on a show. He snatched it on the way down and slapped it onto the back of his hand. "Heads and I'm helping Donna."

It was heads. He left to follow the kids.

She got up and rushed to the door, "wait that's not fair!" She hesitated, mouth agape. He was getting further away. She went to Becky and told her they'd be gone a while.

Old Charles, Daniel's grandfather, inquired from the front porch. "What are you up to boy?"

"I'm looking for Hopper. He's somewhere close!"

"I haven't heard him," the elder tried to say, but the kids ran towards the backyard.

Billie came along, "I'll keep an eye on them!"

Yet the old man wasn't pleased, he looked away and replied, "it'll be getting dark soon, keep 'em safe."

Lucile caught up, a little out of breath even though they were just two houses down. They followed the kids around back.

Donna asked, "what's your cat like?"

Daniel replied, "Hopper is black and fluffy, he's really good at hunting mice. He went missing after I got him a new toy, and I want to show it to him so much."

"That's cool."

"Yeah." Daniel began pointing out Hopper's favorite spots in the backyard, which was separated from the field west of town by two great pine trees, towering vanguards of the wild lands.

As that went on Billie said to her, "hey kiddo, we don't have too much time tonight."

"Okay, but I want to help him. It's sad that his cat is gone. I can do it."

"Did you hear that," Daniel startled, and ran through the trees into the field. Everyone followed.

Billie held a branch up for Lucile to pass under.

She said, "this isn't good idea. I've tried to interfere with people's fortune before and it never goes well."

"How so," he asked.

"Once upon a time a woman cheated on her husband, and I told her how to prepare for his reaction. It gave her confidence, enough to outweigh the guilt on her face. She told him then and there in the park when he came back, and it turned out so much worse than I foretold. He wasn't angry, he was incensed! The police had to come." She laughed to herself, "speaking of which, there was the time Kenny told me to stay put and asked which way to run so he could bring the car back around. I saw that he'd be caught following the rail line, so he took the alley instead. He got tackled by an officer and his partner found me in there by the dumpster."

Billie stopped walking, "I'm sorry, can you repeat that?"

"The point is that I can't get directly involved in the fortunes I tell. Who knows how bad this could go," she finished. The kids yelled as the boy tripped and went down in the grass. As they caught up, she asked, "You've been on edge all day. Why are you set on this?"

He said, watching the boy clean off the wet grass and mud, "I have no direction right now, so I can at least help Donna. These girls have too much put on them."

She nodded, she knew that very well.

As they returned to the search, Daniel once again heard the haunting meow of Hopper, and so too did Donna and Lucile. All around was sagebrush and tall grass, dressed in a light snow, it would seem a black cat might stand out but there nothing. In the distance the horizon was veiled in a thin mist that seemed to encircle the town as far as they could see from cemetery hill to the church off around to the farms, but there was no sign of movement. The meow went silent again.

"Hopper," Daniel yelled, running a little further out, taking no heed of the rough ground despite his fall just seconds ago.

Billie said, "okay, let's spread out a little bit and listen." They did and waited a moment. The kids were restless, but the adults gave them just enough patience. Then the sound came again. "Hold on, don't rush, let's all go together," he called after the boy.

Donna said, "he's got to be close, so don't worry." The boy didn't respond, he just kept on walking, her face dimmed just a bit.

As they went further southwest away from town, Donna looked back to Lucile with an expression of odd curiosity, there was an unusual quality, the sound they were tracking.

Lucile nodded to confirm the suspicion and asked "Billie, does it sound like we're getting closer to you?"

"I still haven't heard it. I'm starting to worry about my hearing."

The ladies shared a concerned glance.

They continued on, drifting further south towards the church. The fog was coming closer, sporadically rising around them conjoined to the congealing miasma. Daniel, despite having a tiny stride, was pulling ahead of the group.

"I think I hear it now," said Billie, opening his senses as much as he could. "What are you thinking?"

Lucile replied, "we're not following a cat. It's that subtle high-pitch underneath, it's coming through the wiɳd."

The thought didn't need long to digest, as a cloud of fog swallowed Daniel whole as he began to shout after the cat frantically. Donna yelled after him, and the adults followed. They came upon him and saw the truth he could not. The boy was rushing around in circles, inspecting empty bushes, almost driven mad by the persistent calling of a groωls. The cat's meow was swimming and swooshing, pausing and pouncing, scattering sage whispɛrs from their homes.

"Daniel, wait," said Donna, whose face darkened with a knowing dread.

"What are you doing, he's right here. If you're not going to help stay out of the way!" Daniel's breαth was growing volatile, he splashed miasma about as he paced, and his eyes were straining to find any sign of his dear pet whose cries danced around his head.

Before anyone could act, the groωls flew away south, and Daniel followed the noise.

Billie called for the boy to wait, which was ignored. He moved to catch up but slipped on the sleet and mud. He went down hard and arose with a tingling sense of panic. Lucile also just about a fell, Donna was managing better and sent ahead. The fog rolled in thicker, and the group was separated from view. They trudged further until the meows went silent, and Daniel began calling out again, and the ground rose in a sharp incline. They had reached the old canal that followed along the edge of the area of the church. Thankfully the groωls had hidden in a patch of grass. Donna was watching it closely when Lucile came along.

Donna crouched down to examine the little thing, "do you think it could lead us to the cat?"

Lucile's expression wasn't hopeful, she raised her voice, "Daniel. When did Hopper go missing?"

"Before Thanksgiving."

It was April.

Donna said quietly, "He'll be sad."

"Be careful," said Billie, before the groωls became active again and moved on further down the canal. Donna nodded and went to catch up while and he strolled along with Lucile. "I guess there’s nothing I can really do to help, huh?"

"You're doing plenty," she said.

"Is there no good ending to this?"

"Sometimes there isn't."

The muddy canal was disused, replaced by another in the days of Atomic Springs' rebirth. It was shallow from years of eroding in the rain, but still a nasty pit to fall into. Billie crossed to the other side and Lucile descended down the bank on her side and they made haste to overtake and flank both Daniel and the groωls. The boy didn't seem to notice, he was fully focused on searching for what his ears heard but his mind had yet to understand, there was no visual of Hopper nor rustling in the bushes yet those tender meows kept teasing him.

Daniel turned back to Donna, "come on, help me! He's right here!"

She gulped.

Billie positioned himself in a good spot to quickly go down and up the canal. Lucile warmed up her hands and signaled. They moved in to snatch the groωls that reacted to their breαth on the wiɳd and hissed at their approach. Daniel got in the way and Lucile had to avoid trampling him. Billie slipped on the last step of the canal and had to catch himself.

"What are you doing," Daniel cried, looking back and forth frantically. "You're scaring him!"

But the groωls didn't avoid Donna, bringing up the rear. She somberly caught it as the aspirant of the coven she was. It began to squirm, but she pulled it in close. The breath of her fingers sinking into its sides. The

meowing stopped, replaced a more sorrowful groan. Daniel froze, and for reasons he couldn't understand his eyes were drawn to her. She began to push and pull and twist and groaning grew distorted and queer.

Donna pulled the groωls asunder and it diffused into the wiɳd.

There was silence.

"What did you do," Daniel's voice began to raise, "what did you do. what did you do!" His arms began to flail, coming uncomfortably close to the girl.

Billie roared as he got to his feet. The boy stopped as the man stomped over to him. Lucile had the briefest thought to intervene before some pungent pulse of misfortune took place, but she saw that nothing was wrong. Billie knelt down, "listen," and all was quiet as the fog drifted past them. "I'm sorry about your cat, but we don't yell at other people."

Daniel deflated even as he began to protest. Billie put a hand upon his shoulder, "let's call it a night, young man."

The walk back was quiet and awkward. Lucile consoled Donna silently. On arriving Daniel's mother made her inquiries, and the boy threw one last tantrum, maybe for a lack of any understanding, perhaps out of guilt for his behavior. He said, "we almost found him, but she scared him off," referring to Donna who did not take it well. Whatever timidity defined her disposition steamed away in a flurry of broken sentences, "you! I! It!" She threw up her arms and stormed off. Daniel's mother took him inside.

Before that could be tended to, Old Charles came down them and gave his apologies. "It's my fault, I buried that cat back in January and I didn't want to tell him."

Lucile and Billie nodded and gave their goodbyes.

They followed along behind Donna, giving her some space to fume.

"She wanted to be useful," said Billie.

"I think the boy had something to do with," said Lucile, "she wanted someone to praise her."

"Yeah, but there’s no controlling how other people handle things."

"That's why it always goes wrong."

"Not always," he said, and they both sighed.

"You were right," Billie, "I have been on edge all day."

"What's bothering you," Lucile asked.

"The same thing that’s been bothering me, I guess. My whole life is upside down and I don't know where I'm going."

Lucile reached for her deck but thought better of it and let the wind fill the silence.

"Everything turned out fine, you were all worried," he said.

"I still think it was bad idea to tempt Fate," she replied sharply, "but things went more or less as I read, so I'm not sure you're coin really did anything."

"Guess I'll have to try again," he grinned.

"You shouldn't, we just got a lucky coincidence this time."

"It could be that you got unlucky those other times, you know. Good things happen, you make them happen."

Lucile let the sound of their breathing carry them the rest of the way. The sky was growing dark, and on the horizon she caught the smallest ray of amber light and purple sky, before it was hidden by the clouds and fog yearning for dark and silence.

She watched Donna go inside and when they were alone, she said, "I'm going to stay here with the girls for the night. Just in case. Hey, what's that?" She pointed to a spot on the ground, and when Billie leaned over her trap was sprung. She pecked him on the cheek dashed inside, only turning around to give a little wave as she shut the door, he was dumbstruck.

Donna was sulking by the bedroom door, when Lucile softly put a hand on her shoulder. "Young lady, you did great today," she said opening the door so that her older sister might hear, "and you kept a witch's silence. That takes restraint."

"It's not fair."

"No, it's not, but I bet your sister will be proud."

Becky croaked, "tell me what happened."

Lucile fetched more water as they talked, and embellished the little one's story. Donna got to see her sister smile with pride. It wasn't much but it was good.

Billie walked home unaware that he was holding his cheek. He wasn't really thinking but saw with fresh eyes this town in which he'd been living and would continue doing so. Despite the light blanket of snow and the wafting fog and many jagged branches still littering the town, the sidewalk the clean and he had a clear path forward. He pulled his hand away from his face, it felt warm. It wasn't much but it was everything.

Lucile finished making a bed on the couch. The house was quite except for the occasional soft scraping of the branches of the hidden tree coming through the interior wall. She thumbed through her tarot cards. The role of a fortune teller was not to help people change their fates, only to prepare them. Sure, she'd seen people deny their fate or remain undecided. Fate knew they would have a reading and what they'd choose to do after, she could always feel it in the undulations. However, this new idea, Billie's idea, to use Luck to overcome Fate, to use her power to do something good. It wasn't much, but it was frightening.

That Decision

Donna giddily hid under the cover of her bed, succeeding in not disturbing her sister but failing to fall asleep. Her mind was filled with possibilities, the images of the tarot cards and the wonderous things they held. Would Lucile teach her more? Could she read a fortunes too? But wait, there was so much work to be done. She should focus on the basics first, which was fine, great even, she proved she could do it today, she could be a witch, just like her sister. She'd have to ask Lucile after she earned it.

Flip & Fate, Episode 3: Till Death Do Us - Part 1

"Have you heard any news about Lizzy," asked Sherry.

Lucile replied, "the last time we talked she wanted to know what I really thought, and she didn't like the answer. I haven't seen her since."

"That's too bad," said Sherry, who sat back in her seat. "You know, you should really come the women's group here."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing! Just that I'd like to have you there, that's all."

Lucile started her day by retrieving her dolly from the house, she had a brief conversation with Billie who offered to make her breakfast again, but she'd already eaten with the girls that morning. She set out for some fortune telling and keeping an eye on the thickening miasma, but likely due to the weather, business was nonexistent. When Sherry suggested she come help set up for the weekly youth group, she agreed. Now they talked in between very short bursts of actually working.

"Babysitting, volunteering everywhere, it's no wonder you know everything that's going on," Lucile said, Sherry took the compliment proudly. Lucile continued, " I hope this isn't delicate, you haven't mentioned your own family."

"I had one, not kids, a husband I mean," said Sherry reassuringly, then she finished, "three of them."

"Wait, Sherry, what? How old are you?"

"Thirty, and I've lived here for five years. I divorced my third husband at twenty-six." Sherry saw her companion's shock and began to speak. "I grew up in a small town in northern California, a little nook where people tried to escape the cities. Very religious. I got married at sixteen, I thought we were in love. When Saylor's Quake hit, I wanted to join the relief force and spend my life helping people and he wanted to stay where we were. We got divorced and that embarrassed my parents, so when the neo-meth pilgrims came through town, I joined.

"They told me it was a cult, but how could they be when they love God so much? I married in the group, and we travelled down the west coast for a year. I don't regret it, it was one of the most spiritually fulfilling times of my life, but I didn't like the way our leaders collected donations. We were supposed to be helping the unfortunate, not shmoozing money out of people. And when I wanted to put down roots, so they could grow and bear fruit for everyone, my husband didn't agree. He wanted us to enjoy our youth, whatever that means.

"The third husband, he was dentist that opened his own office over in Shoshone Falls, and he was a mistake. I had nowhere else to go. I thought as long I had Jesus beside me things would work out, but I realized too late that Jesus couldn't help my husband if he didn't open his heart. I met the pastor while he was visiting town, and I ran away here, and finished the divorce after. Can you keep a secret? I felt a little disappointed when I found out the pastor was already married. Silly."

Lucile took it all in asked, half delicately, half pleadingly, and half very concerned, "so you've remained single since because you've changed."

Sherry smiled bashfully and put away any doubts, "yes. I thought things would work themselves out, and they don't. I still haven't figured out how to work things out on my own."

Billie popped his in through the door, "there you are!" He joined Lucile and Sherry, who was oddly quiet. "I thought you'd be telling fortunes."

"Sherry thought it was a little bit too cold."

"No kidding," he said.

Sherry joined, "if only you had a shop."

"If only," said Lucile. "Was there any other gossip you wanted to talk about?"

She thought a moment, "oh! There are some rumblings about Angela again. You wouldn't know, but people have suspected she's been cheating on poor Alex for a long time, he's a trucker, goes away for days at time. No proof but everyone kind of knows."

Billie nodded knowingly.

Sherry asked him, "how much did Mari tell you?"

"Of why you guys stopped inviting Angela? Just that."

"She didn't say anything else?"

"Marianne never said a bad word about anyone. Instead, she said nice things; it took me a while to figure that out."

"What did she say about me?"

Lucile shot Billie an expectant glance, but he didn't notice.

He said, "Marianne said your heart was in the right place."

Sherry was at first pleased, but as Lucile's snickering grew louder so too did the subtext.

Billie added, "and she told me to never tell you about what we were getting for the secret Santa."

"That's fair," Sherry stated.

He brooded for a moment, as the ladies began to wrap up plentiful threads of their discussion. Then he interjected, "hey, did Marianne ever say anything about me?"

She thought, "not that I recall, she was happy with you. I think you only ever came up when we talked about men," she finished thought with a implicating tone.

Billie nervously reiterated, "and did she say anything about me?"

"That your heart was in the right place."

Lucile's cackling quickly infected Sherry and eventually even him.

"Don't forget you're welcome to come, it'll be fun," Sherry called after them.

"I'll think about it!" Lucile and Billie began back towards the neighborhood. He took it upon himself to push her dolly. She watched how he checked the shifting contents as it rattled over every bump and pebble.

"You really should open a shop," said Billie. "Seriously."

"It's a nice idea," she said, but quickly switched, "how was your phone call?"

"My parents are a little worried I'm not coming to visit, but I told them I'd be fine. They mentioned coming down to see me. Maybe Memorial Day," he pondered. "And how are the girls?"

"They'll be okay for the day. Dorothy cared more about someone keeping an eye on things than helping her." Lucile checked the growing pools of miasma around their shins, and the various whispɛrs glowing in the drifting patches of fog. She said, "Diffusing groɷlss and mδans down so they don't turn into something nastier isn't a bad idea. And mixing them back into the wiɳd might help dilute this miasma. But there's an entire town to cover, so maybe we should just handle the emergencies."

Lucile set up her table again and Billie stayed around to chat. He kept his jacket zipped up as Lucile shuffled her way to warmth.

She said, "can you believe Sherry got married so young?"

"I got married pretty young," he said.

"But still-" Lucile trailed off, then asked, "what did you expect to happen, being with someone so early?"

"I thought we would work things out together. Work the orchard, get a place, seal the deal once I could afford a ring." He looked off into dreary clouded sky, perhaps with a question on his mind. He sat up, "what about you? You ever getting married?"

"I don't stay in one place for long," Lucile said is such a way that it didn't feel like an answer.

They read some fortunes, and tested Billie's coin against Lucile's cards, observing how luck and fate might dictate their lunch orders. They played a hand of blackjack, and watched some visitors park their car, get out, look around the dreary town, then get right back in and leave.

Eventually Billie announced, "Alright, I know where you can open a shop."

"We shouldn't."

"It's just a room for your table, it can be temporary. It's not like you're getting married."

The Bartender agreed, "yeah, you could use the other room. We could discuss rent later, but for now, how about you help me out with some things around here."

The last part he was directing more towards Billie. Apparently, there were still many repairs that needed to be done, also it was likely that Lucile would find opportunity to assist inside the bar. She was reserved through this conversation. They entered the other room, and spelunked through the dusty construction supplies and cobwebbed debris, and The Bartender undid the barrier and pried open the other door with a great sticky cracking sound. He said, "We could move some of this upstairs and some of it backwards, and hang one of these curtains, if you don't need that much space."

As the light filled the room and Lucile assessed the idea, her eyes began to sparkle, "can we really? May we? Even if I decide it's a bad idea and don't use it anymore?"

"Do you see how much of a wreck this is? You'll only be making it better."

That was all she needed to hear. Over the next hour Lucile and Billie did some initial work on clearing the room. They stopped around dinner time and washed up, joining everyone in the bar. Lucile was cheerily volunteering to serve drinks and food. They went to check on the girls and finally returned home late in the evening. Lucile was drawing up diagrams and listing ideas on a piece of paper in the kitchen as Billie listened to the radio.

Her mood only damped by an argument that broke out across the street.

"Who's that," she asked.

Billie joined her, "that is Angela and Alex."

Lights came on in the windows of houses around the block, and while not much could be seen and little understood, they and the rest of the neighborhood were able to make out Alex shouting one thing, "you're a whore!"

Seems that Angela had been cheating after all.

The following morning was spent cleaning and preparing the soon-to-be shop. They had to be quiet so as to not wake The Bartender, but Lucile was so enthusiastic that they still made quick progress. By the early afternoon they were ready to buy materials for a sign.

On their way back from the hardware store, Billie suddenly said, "wait, did you need to put your laundry in?"

"I did. Oh, but I should probably go put it in the dryer."

"But you're wearing that same shirt," he was genuinely confused.

"I only have the three," she said.

"That's not much of a load of laundry," he thought aloud, "do you want any of Marianne's or Mrs. Law's clothes? We got a lot of boxes to deal with back at the house."

Lucile looked into his eyes as she repeated flatly, "do I want any of her clothes?" And she never answered the question, maybe she didn't want to.

And perhaps he never quite understood what that meant. But he continued, "I should donate the rest to the thrift store. Do you want to take a look at the thrift store? My treat. We might find a new outfit for Madam Delphina."

"Maybe later. I'll think about it."

After a while Lucile to a break and asked Bilie for some of his breɑth. He obliged and she read a fortune that she kept to herself. A moment later she said, "you know what, could you go on without me? I think I need to go talk to Dorothy about something, and then I'll make the sign at home."

"Do you want me to come with? I was hoping you'd get to open tonight," he said.

"I'll be okay, you should head on to help out with whatever he needed, and maybe we can open up late."

Billie joined The Bartender and once given a goal he set upon the task eagerly. They moved the rest of the supplies out of the shop and up the stairs to the entrance of the third floor. Sheets of drywall, wood, nails, all remnants of a plan that never came to fruition.

"The previous owner was a land developer, built this place about ten years after the old Marsh couple settled here," said the Bartender. "Then a fire burned out the third floor. For whatever reason he just gave up on fixing it. When I came to town he was willing to part with it for a good price. But things didn't go smoothly for me either. The whole third floor is still missing a roof, and the temp roof is starting to leak."

After much dust was kicked up and sweat was poured, the two men naturally sank down the counter of the bar and ravenously downed a pitcher of water. The Bartender refilled it with beer.

Billie said, "I've never asked, how'd you end up running a bar out of an apartment building?"

"I went into the guard after high school. Spent six years stationed on the wall, then came here. Someone I knew suggested we open a bar." The Bartender started habitually organizing the counter.

"You don't want to talk about it," asked Billie.

"I just did."

"Alright, well, I wanted to say thank you, for looking out for me these past months. And for Lucile. I wouldn't have made it without you."

"You're welcome."

Things were quiet for a moment. Billie was just about to ask about their next chore when The Bartender spoke.

"I only joined because I talked to that recruiter, and I only talked to him because I have nothing better to do during lunch break. I'd probably still be on the wall, if it wasn't for what happened to Rich. A detainee bit a guard's ear off and ran handcuffed into the Apacheria desert in the middle of the night. Four of us were sent over to grab him quick and quiet. We were only gone for ten minutes. I remember how beautiful the stars were that night, nothing but darkness and stars and empty desert for miles. That beauty betrayed me. My heart was pounding hard, we only went half a mile, just down this little embankment and out of sight of the towers. Rich lost sight of the target, I didn't, so I tackled him. Beth was the first to scream, and then she and Jim took off. I tackled something out there, but it wasn't the target. Rich was still standing there confused when I bolted, and I thought he followed. But I never saw him again. That's all I'm allowed to say.

The Bartender's gaze went blank, "that's all I'm allowed to say." He shook his head an continued, "I'll tell you something, when your blood is more adrenaline than water, you start seeing things, even after you come back down. And the only way to stop seeing things is to replace some of that blood with alcohol. Me and Beth both figured that out, and we left together as soon as we could. We bummed around wherever the wind took us. I wouldn't say we were in love, but I would have married her. She turned into a mean drunk, and I wanted to go back, serve another term, I didn't have any purpose or structure. She wouldn't let me go. Then we wound up in this little tourist road stop and the owner was looking for an out. We opened the bar together. Then some things got out of hand, and I told her she had to quit drinking.

"Then she decided if she was going to quit drinking, she couldn't live in a small town like this. But running the bar was the best I'd felt since I got out. I refused. We fought. She grabbed that bottle of gin down there and finished it off and shoved it in my face. Then she took my motorcycle, and I haven't seen her since. I hope some poor guy out there isn't getting punched in his sleep."

"She took your bike?!"

"She took my bike."

"Man, I'm so sorry."

The Bartender smiled, "it was a piece of crap anyways."

Billie asked, "Why do you keep the bottle?"

"Because I don't know what I expected." The Bartender finished, "sometimes I think about burning this place down, and going back to the guard, maybe the GLO, do something useful with my life."

"You are useful, you've been a huge help to me."

The Bartender nodded and got ready for their next bit of work up on the third floor. "I hope this fog clears out soon. It's getting hard to breathe."

They didn't accomplish anything else. The third floor had at one point been reframed after the fire, but long neglected. Upon a brief inspection, the men realized that much of it was warped and would need to be redone, the funds for which were hypothetical. While The Bartender began preparing for opening and making some calls, Billie put some finishing touches on the shop. He hung curtains to block off the remaining storage at the back of the room and swept the remaining debris behind them. Now he'd wait for Lucile to open up shop. He'd even try to chat with patrons of the Bar, see if he couldn't send some unusual cases her way.

Or at least he would have if she didn't call and ask him to meet her at the house in half an hour. He did, and things escalated into a blur.

Billie entered the house to the smell of burning and the screeching of the smoke detector. There were clothes spilled in the hallway. Lucile was desperately trying to reach the alarm, while a pot bubbled and splattered on the stove. The counter was filled with a mess of dishes, the sink with brown grease laden water polluted with black scraps of burned food. In a voice louder than normal, he said, "what are you doing," while moving to overtake Lucile and disable the smoke detector. Lucile exclaimed, "there's no fire, there's no fire," while looking around. He disabled the alarm. She sheepishly backed towards the counter and did nothing more. They both smell smoke. He pointed, "it's the soup!" A mixture of smoke and steam poured from every bubble. He marched over and shut it off, then attempted to move the pot off the heat. But the stove was cluttered with utensils and vessels, and both the pot and the floor was splattered with oil. He hesitated to set in down, his foot shifted unexpectedly, his hand slipped slightly, soon enough he spilled the pot on the counter. In his rush to set it upright, he touch the hot metal of the rim, and swore loudly with stinging fingertips.

And then the fight broke out.

Billie said, with anger or surprise in his voice, "Look at this mess, how do you burn soup?"

Lucile said, with irritation or desperation in her voice, "I don't know. I'll clean it, I'll fix it. You can go, I'm sorry."

He said, with confusion or frustration, "No, I'll help. We can go have dinner with the girls."

She said, with denial or defense, "I already took care of the girls so I could do this. Please, just leave."

He said, with stubbornness or accusation, "Leave where? It's my house. You didn't have to do this. We could have opened the shop tonight."

She said, with distress or retaliation "And you didn't have to spill it all over the counter, it was still good."

He said, with judgement, "You were going set the house on fire!"

She said nothing and left the house.

Maybe the eyes are more observant than the mind is deft and perhaps the heart moves slower than the tongue, or possibly rationality is a luxury bought by time.

Lucile walked away with purpose, but her destination was arbitrary. She wandered and was gradually pulled by a certain gravity and when Donna answered the door, she was relieved. The girls asked her what was wrong, but she gave only vague explanations and busied herself. She began cleaning the kitchen, taking extra care with the brewing vessels. She entered the courtyard and found Dorothy unresponsive, then found herself slowly sinking down the wall, finally hidden from the girls curious eyes. The sun was almost down, and the already dominant shadows of the tree spared not light for the grass, clovers, moss, and soil. She sat in silence.

"Why are you crying," asked Dorothy.

Lucile steadied herself, "just making mistakes I've made before."

The witch had been sedentary for weeks, and Lucile began bathing her with a towel and cleaning away waist from her groin.

Dorothy said, "I'm all ears." She seemed beyond exhausted, speaking from some distance that drained each word of it's life. Yet she did not sound insincere.

Lucile responded, "I see the mound has flattened out some, are you almost done?"

"It is, but I fear I've made a mistake. It's the first I've made and may be the last."

"Is there anything else I can do?"

The witch made eye contact, unfocused but purposed, and clutch the hand of her caretaker and said, "when this is done, you are free. But I need you now."

Neither one had their question answered, both seemed content.

As Dorothy began to eat, a slow process. Lucile continued her bath, reaching the arms and that is when she noticed it. Rough bark-like skin and formed along the under arm with a verdant green spreading through the veins. And along the calves and feet it was worse, full discoloration and twisting roots sprouting from the palms of her feet. And then picking through her hair, full bark had scabbed over the scalp, and budding branches had sprouted among the follicles. All of it in a natural disarray, fully ungroomed transforming flesh. Lucile even found what she initially thought was a fallen leaf from the tree to be attached and thriving.

"Too much. Good god, Dorothy, you'll ruin yourself."

"Do not take the lord's name in vain."

Lucile was at loss of what to do. She had to cane her neck to find the witch's gaze, and only then did she notice even the encroaching apple red stain in the irises.

Dorothy smiled at her, apparently moved by the concern. She spoke, "Ruby was a splendid witch. She did so much and all through her own effort. She gave up so much to make this tree, and it should have been the crowning achievement of her coven, but I was born with Sternwraith Syndrome." Lucile felt Dorothy's invisible hand clasp over her one.

"And I spent my capacity on fruit to fix it. She was so disappointed when I vomited the third fruit. She never said anything though. In the end I was heartbroken. She thought so little of herself. Of course, I had to drink in the tree and wiɳd with abandon, how else could I do this? Save everything she made, save the woman she used to be?"

Dorthy tried to shift the position of her feet, God only knows how long she sat in that pose, but the root pulled against her tender nerves, and she winced in pain. She smiled with watery eyes, "I don't know what I expected."

There was a ruckus in the night. Billie went outside to answer the deputy's call, Angela Wiedholz had gone missing, but he had no information to offer. He returned inside, a scent of failure still lingering in the home. The kitchen was clean save for two plates of food, each with a toasted piece of garlic bread, a chicken fried steak burnt on one side, and a serving of thick creamy vegetable soup mush. One plate was half eaten. Billie stayed awake listening to the noise of investigation outside.

The phone rang and the morning light surprised him. Billie hobbled off of the couch to get it, his back all kinked and muscles mangled. He just barely managed a groggy greeting. The voice of an adolescent girl demanded, "you need to get over here and say sorry." The line closed before he could respond, and then he realized it was Becky.

However, when he was not the only one with business at the patchwork house of the old Marsh couple. On arrival he found the sheriff's deputy seeming bothered to be waiting for an old woman's help, but alongside him was a clerk of the G.L.O. who held her clipboard and stood with upmost conviction in their task. The deputy had never dealt with a missing person before, but the thought of Sheriff Gilles coming down from Fort Ross to handle things had spurred him to inquire with the clerk for advice. This led him here and fate would soon relieve him of his troubles. Lucile emerged and came to speak with them. Becky stood tall on the steps, while telling her little sister to stay out of sight.

The Clerk checked her papers, "and who are you?"

Lucile said, "I'm an assistant, visiting from out of town. And he recently became an assistant as well." She looked at Billie and said, "you can go inside," as if trying to get rid of him.

He waited with Donna just inside the door, listening to the strange conversation out front. The deputy made clear that things were urgent, a local woman was missing and initial efforts failed. Ruby Marsh was the designated special consultant for such cases. However, for what should have been a brief confirmation of their plan was drawn out by The Clerk's many needling questions. She continuously pointed out the irregularities in Lucile's explanations, but did so blindly, without malice or intent yet still with a conviction. The Clerk apparently had paperwork detailing exactly how this conversation should have gone. Ultimately The Clerk signed off on her papers and took Lucile's signature as well. Uncanny.

When all was finished, the girls would stay to take care of things at home, and Lucile would join the search effort in their stead, with the expectation of expedient results.

Billie said gently, "hey listen-"

Lucile cut him off, "we don't have time. Just come help me."

To be continued.

The Other Decision

Dorothy could feel that all was still in the house, the immediate area of the domain was in her grasp now, but only just barely, as if she held something both heavy and slippery with the edge of her fingers ready to fall and shatter with the slightest wrong vibration. She couldn't spare effort on anything else, and an old familiar trembling returned to her alongside a shivering in her skin. Her wraith-flesh arms began to twitch, she had to use them to hold everything together, but that very act had worn her down to where she could hardly use them. She continued the work, one hand on the mound drawing from the roots and bones, one hand on her lap drawing on herself, and two hands gently woven into the domain and holding it firm. Her hand might fail soon, her whole body might fail soon, trembling in the dark.

The fortune teller was sleeping on the couch, and some frightened childish part of Dorothy's mind wanted to call out, to scream and cry for help. However, it was she that put herself in this position. She had to hold on a little longer, hold on to every agonizing second, for the sake of penance.

Flip & Fate Episode 4: Till Death Do Us - Part 2

Lucile readied her strategy and turned to Billie. "I need to speak with the husband, Alex. Would you go talk to the deputy and find out where he is? I would have asked, but I didn't want the clerk hovering over me."

"Yeah, sure I can do that," he replied, positively chipper. "Are you coming with me?"

"No, you can go do it. I need to finish some things here."

He waited a moment, "okay yeah. I'll go."

Lucile went inside and hid her face from the girls. Under her breath she snarled, "what is he so happy about?" Perhaps she just couldn't stand the idea, maybe she already knew he wasn't.

Out beyond Gatlin's cornfield and the chime line, Lucile arrived to meet Alex, Billie followed. Missing person cases were serious things, and so the town readied a search, before it was too late. Alex could not wait for the deputy to organize everyone, so John joined him to sweep this area.

She said, "Alex, I'm a consultant for this case. Talk to me and I'll find your wife."

At first, he was receptive, but his mood quickly turned. He scoffed, "This is ridiculous!"

"Hey, don't yell at her," said Billie, although he may have been too quick to say it.

"Yeah Alex, listen to him, don't yell at me," Lucile said with a hint of venom. She finished her warmup shuffle and began talking to the befuddled husband about his missing wife, with his hand held atop the deck of cards, of course. John didn't say anything but certainly looked incredulous. She asked, "do you have any idea why Angela left?"

"Because I yelled at her after she cheated on me. I don't even know if I want her to come back."

"Then why are you out here looking for her?"

"We have two kids. She has to come back."

"So when you see her again, you're willing to work past what happened?"

What's with the questions, huh?"

Lucile gave him a kind look, "it’s part of the process. You didn't say no. You might work though this, either you don't care, or-" Lucile observed the brief ripple of passion in his breath, he cared. She continued, "so you understand why she cheated."

Alex looked away, eyes low. There was nothing for him to look at, just sage brush and even that was covered by the ever-thickening fog. "She's been unhappy for a while. I'm a trucker, I make good money but it's demanding. She wants to go travelling and on vacations and so many things. She wants to live in big city where things are interesting, the spot we have here is nice, and affordable. I've told her we need to wait till I've saved enough money. I don't get it, I love the time I spend here with her and kids."

Lucile pulled her deck away from his touch and began to shuffle again.

Alex grew uneasy and asked, "you know why she left already, everybody heard me screaming. What do you think about all this?"

She replied, "I think that cheating is a terrible way to get a message across. I also that you get to come and go, of course your happy to be home. But she is a homemaker, right? For her, that house and those kids are her job, when you're away and here."

Alex nodded weakly.

Lucile finished and turned to Billie, "hey, I need a place to put my cards." Then she finished with her client, "but it’s not my place to judge, just to find your wife."

Billie made a motion like he might bend over to be a table but thought better of it and just laid his jacket out. Lucile did her thing, and together the group walked back to town. Alex found Angela waiting on the back porch of their home, just as the fortune teller predicted.

"Just like that, huh?" Billie returned from calling the deputy.

Lucile stood out front of the house, still looking into the windows of the Wiedholz Home. Alex was attempting to talk, but Angela wouldn't say a word. Then he drew the curtains and there was nothing else to be learned.

"Do you think they're going to be okay?"

"I don't know, I shouldn't mess with things that aren't my business."

Billie said, "I think Alex is doing the best he can, he was just doing the wrong thing."

"Yes, but they want different things, they want to live in different ways. That's a big gap to cross. Either they'll break, or they'll make sacrifices. It won't be good." Lucile couldn't help but respond; realizing that, she abruptly announced, "I'm going back to see the girls."

"Okay," he tried to walk alongside her, "what's the plan for today? Should I go patrol? Do the girls need help? Do you want to go finish up the shop later?"

"I don't know," she said and continued marching.

"Would you stop acting like- like- like I killed you cat!"

She turned to face him.

"I can't say sorry if you don't let me."

She finally said, "I was just trying to do something nice."

"I know and I was just surprised by the mess."

"Okay." She said to end the discussion and moved to another. "Maybe it would be better for me to stay with the girls after all."

He had no way to disagree with that, even if he wanted to.

She continued, "we were supposed to help with some more chores at the bar, right? You can go ahead. I'll meet you there in bit."

He uneasily replied, "alright."

Billie did a little detective work, looking over the garbage and anything that had been disturbed in the pantry. Then he went to the grocery store and attempted to replace all the ingredients of the meal Lucile couldn't complete. She'd be able to try again, maybe an extra pair of hands could help. Then he went to the bar to find some cash and a note from The Bartender, asking him to grab some supplies from the hardware store if he got the chance. And who should he bump into, but Sean.

"Hey man, how's the orchard?"

Sena said, "it's good. I ended up taking your advice and I tried to handle the deer better. I figure we can expand how much are we do bag-for-you-bag-for-us to make up for the manpower. At least while we adjust."

Billie said, "that's good, that's good. You'll let me know when you're ready, right? There's a specific tree Marianne said made the best apples for pies."

"Man, you come by some time and tie a ribbon to a tree, and that'll just be your tree."

"Thank you."

Yeah, absolutely," Sean shifted, "and uh, I heard you've been going to the Marsh house a lot. Are you caretaking for the old lady?"

Billie shifted as well, "something like that. Hard to call me a caretaker, but I'm getting paid."

"Good, so you're good?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

"Good!"

They both went quiet, and Billie had one other thing to say, "hey, could I ask you a woman question?"

Sean looked curious, "you can ask, I'll try."

"What does it mean if I girl thanks you by kissing you on the cheek? And then tries to make a surprise dinner for you?"

Sean gave him the most dramatic incredulous stare and rolling of eyes.

"Yeah, I know I'm an idiot."

"Just to make sure, she's not married or committed elsewhere? You didn't save her from a dragon? She's thanking you for something normal?"

"Yeah."

He laughed and thought for a moment, then noticed something, "Bill, are you not wearing your wedding ring?"

"No, it was getting a little uncomfortable-"

Sean erupted laughing, and Billie was infected despite the embarrassment. They had to move out of the way of the store entrance, as apparently this conversation wouldn't be so brief.

"You're in it."

"I'm in it?" Billie groaned. "Well, that's just great cause we're fighting."

"You already screwed it up?!" Sean contained his enjoyment, "well don't feel to bad. I'm having trouble with my woman too."

"How so?"

"We have different outlooks on things, politics and the news. You know it's so much easier if you lie, just tell women what they want to here."

"It might easier, but I don't think that's right. Why be together if you have to lie?"

"I agree," said Sean throwing his hands up, "that's why we're fighting, cause I tell her the truth. But maybe I could lie little, or just let it go a little more, after all, it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter?"

"No, none of that crap matters. It doesn't affect your life, not really. Cleaning the house, parenting, liking the same music, that's what matters. Oh, and sleep. You can't be a night owl dating a morning person. Does not work."

Their chat soon ended as Lucile came into view, the fog having veiled her approach. Billie exclaimed a hello and the men quickly wrapped up.

Sean got moving, "it was good talking to you. You better finish what you started!"

Lucile looked and Billie curiously.

He asked, "we were talking about his lady troubles. how much did you overhear?"

"Something about lying to women."

He dodged, "what did you think about what he said, about what's important in a relationship?"

She said, "those things are fine, but if I've learned anything from talking to people, it's that trust and respect are more important. And they crumble easily"

Together they met The Bartender, who was actually awake at this hour even if barely. He explained to them that he would need to restart repairing the roof. He was trying to correct his sleep schedule, because he couldn't be up on the roof hammering away in the middle of the night. Billie was asked if he could commit to the project over the coming weeks. "Absolutely. I owe you," he replied. The Bartender went back to bed, and the two of them went up to clean away the wasted materials and debris from the third floor.

The fog had been growing thicker across the town for days and with it an eerie sense of concern. From up on the third floor they could just barely see the headlights of cars crawling at a snail's pace between the vague suggestions of buildings.

The task at hand proved easier than it seemed. Although the third floor was burned out and populated with torn weather plastics and scattered construction supplies begrimed with leaves that blew in with the wind, once they began cleaning the pattern in the mess became discernible. They worked for a while, each alone.

Billie asked, "after this do you want to set up your table in the shop?" She responded in tone he couldn't quite gauge, "sure."

"Do you just want to have dinner here tonight," he asked, and although it felt like she heard him and that she might be thinking of an answer the silence lingered too long. "I could go take care of the girls, you can do your thing," he said in a pointed way, but such that she was now wondering what he meant, probing or provoking? Lucile did not answer, again. "Or do you not want to do the shop after all? You seemed pretty excited to decorate it," he said, growing weary.

She broke, "I'm just have second thoughts. Wondering if all that work is worth it for something temporary." And he might have replied but she cut him off, "You've been practicing right?"

"Yeah."

"Good, good. How far have you gotten?"

"I never really hear anything, but I can manage to see some flickers for a few seconds at a time. Except for this fog, it turns, what's the word? Opaque."

She said, "I'm not surprised you don't hear anything, the whispɛrs are repelled by your passenger. But it sounds like you're making progress. Keep practicing, it will help Dorothy when the time comes."

"Okay," Billie said with trepidation, but he was also happy enough to ease the tension. "Should I practice right now? Is there anything good for me to focus on?"

Lucile seemed to agree, eager to stay on this topic. "Let me see," she said scanning about the open room. There was something near the window, but her eyes struggled to get a clear picture. Up here on the third floor the miasma wasn't so suffocating that her eyes could not penetrate the fog, but wafting columns had begun rising into the wiɳd above, making for periodic mirages in the wiɳd. The soɱnds of the town were growing unstable, and small fragments of the miasma wanted to congeal but the sheer mass of it maintained itself, a saturated lake of incoherent æther. What malformed soɱnds might appear from such a wiɳd Lucile did not know, but what might follow in it's shadow she now did. She reached up to touch something, a fleeting glimmer, probably just a whispɛr or maybe a gentle groѡls being masked by the wisps. "What are you," she asked.

Billie turned away for a moment, stuffing a garbage sack, when he heard her make the faintest sharp inhale. It was so quick that at first he ignored it, but gradually his mind dwelled on it further and her silence even more so. She would have gasped but it was stolen right from her lungs. He looked up to see her frozen and his goosebumps flourished.

"What's wrong," he asked.

"Billie, I want you to go downstairs for a minute. Don't come back for an hour."

"What?" He stepped forward.

"Don't come closer." She spoke eerily calm, as though the problem was too serious to panic. "I screwed up, I touched a sϛream. They can be hard to see when they’re sleeping, until they're triggered. I couldn't tell in the fog, and it's so close to going off, I can feel the pressure swirling inside. Go downstairs."

"Can I help, what-"

"Go downstairs, I can handle it!" She yelled limply not allowing herself to move, torn between her frustration of him and fear of it. She trembled, "It's not a big deal. Just go down and let me focus, I'll diffuse it and be there in ten minutes."

He took a step back while muttering his thoughts on impulse, "if it's not a big deal-"

She did not hear him. And Madam Delphina spoke, "if I get turned into a frog, promise to give me a kiss. Now hurry along, I need to get started."

Lucile's eyes were becoming dry, her shoulder tired, but that was nothing compared to what suffering she imagined the sϛream would cause. Just within the sϛream's facade its core turned to her, like bird skull with rictus human grin and the sad eyes of doctor waiting for the patient to fall asleep for the last time. It starred through her waiting for something to react to. She turned over so many memories in her mind looking for the information, for how to identify and how to counter. She knew that sϛreams could be triggered by probing pnuema, she had to remember the external traits before doing anything else.

Yet all she remembered were her failures. She remembered Lady Morgana calling on her in a class exercise, and the other girls being shocked at how far behind she was for that age. She tried to think of the lessons but only found the other aspirant's glares. Worse still, her own rebuttals, her defiance, her retaliations. With each memory she strayed even further from the knowledge she wanted and felt the strain of urgency weighing down upon her

The floor creaked, and she was aware of the sweat stinging her eyes. A footstep fell, and she was aware of the soft hum of the wiɳd.

Billie said, "it's that sparkly thing above your hand, right?"

Her arm began shiver, "don't do it."

The sϛream twitched and let out caw that warped into banshee fright.

With a dash and twist, Billie lunged forward wrapped his arm around Lucile's waist. He yanked her off her feet and propelled then back. But Lucile had gone limp, and in his rush, he couldn't manage his own balance. A tangle of legs sent them spinning and Lucile ended up on her back with Billie crouching over, eyes and teeth clenched, waiting for something to strike his back.

The fearful heartbeats in their ears subsided, replaced by one another's breathing. The horrible caw was replaced too, with a queer shrill dripping. Billie looked into Lucile's eyes and followed them over his shoulder. He only caught a glimpse before he blinked and could see no longer. For just a moment he heard the air quietly crackling and saw a nostalgic fair skinned arm ending in a porcelain claw oozing dregs of curdled oil. The oil could barely drip.

When he looked back, Lucile's eyes gazed deeply into his, they felt warm, hot even, pressing into his mind. She leaned back a little, pressing away from him. Softly relieved she said, "that was stupid. We could have died."

He pulled her back tight and said in her ear, "I wasn't mad at you."

"I know, she wasn't there yesterday."

He let her down full and sat, both of them weak. He said, "I don't want you to leave town. If you need to stay with the girls I understand, but I don't want that either. Having you in the house is nice. I thought the shop would be nice. I got too worked about it."

She placed her hand on his but didn't speak.

He said again, "I don't want you to leave town."

"I know."

They sat up and took a moment to collect themselves. Neither one noticed or was concerned as stalked along the perimeter clearing away any miasma or soμnd that strayed too close.

They finished with their chores and decided to fetch the last of the decorations from the house to fill out the shop. They walked very close together, stealing glances now and then. Outside the dinner they found Jean standing in the fog.

Billie asked, "what's going on with you today?"

"Oh, just getting fresh air," she said sarcastically.

"Not much around, is there?"

Lucile said, "so what's wrong?"

Jean was taken off guard, so easily read, but she answered, "me and John are having issues. He didn't put away his shoes and it turned into a fight."

"Are the shoes really that big of deal?"

"No, but putting them away right isn't either, so he should do it. I've told him before."

"So, you're worried he'll do it forever. A life trapped with a messy man."

Jean's expression melted into relief. "Yes! What do I do, I don't want to have this fight again."

Lucile dealt her cards atop the trash can, having already snuck them out moments before, "oh you will have this fight again, but not as much as you're worried about. Talk to him, if it's a big deal to you then he'll listen."

Billie said, "if I may, the shoes aren't that big of a deal, so he doesn't care like you do. He'll mess up now and then."

"But he'll try for you, if you're nice about it," finished Lucile.

Jean said, "I know, I was thinking the same thing. I'm just pouting like a child.

Lucile said, "the littlest things can set people off. The big things put pressure on people, but the little things slip through the cracks."

Billie said, "do you think fighting just inevitable?"

"I wish it wasn't." Lucile broached, "what did you and Marianne fight about?"

"We didn't, but sometimes things went wrong. We always tried to make it up to each other. That's what matters."

"I guess it is."

Their chat lasted a moment longer, and Jean was just about to return to work, when a car came screeching out of the neighborhood, pedal to the metal and tires slipping all over the road. It was so sudden they all stood shocked, when the pounding of footsteps and shouts came near. Alex stumbled and came to a stop, heaving for air.

"Did you guys see Angela?!" Before anything else was said, Alex straightened up and cursed about his children being left alone.

Lucile and Billie followed. They waited for him to see his kids while cleaning up a toppled trash can and it's strewn contents. Eventually Alex came out to speak with them, "I think my marriage might be over." he had seen them work before and cooperated now. But when reading into his fate, Lucile furrowed her brow, then she read Billie's fate and announced, "we'll go find her."

In the truck driving towards the highway, Billie asked, "you look frustrated."

Lucile dealt another three cards onto her lap, "I wanted to talk to her, see what her deal was, but I can read you're fortune clear as day. You're finding her without me."

He said, "got it. One way or another, we'll make it work. Those kids need their parents."

She responded with a soft, "mhmm."

The entrance to the highway had been bust open, the attendant was staring at the damage and the deputy soon arrived. When all was said, they drove west and soon found their lead. They would have still been in sight

of the town, if not for the fog, but here on the highway was still the sign pointing out to the historic reactor site, and next to it were freshly made tire tracks that trampled the grass away into the field. They went off road into fog.

Billie peered through the windows of Angela's SUV, but no one was inside. Lucile got out and waited there while he went further ahead. They talked back and forth as he disappeared. He followed hints of bent grass, and just as he wondered where this was leading, the looming concrete walls of the reactor building provided an answer. Angela was just inside the entryway.

She said the minimum and held herself with in grave way. He could not tell if it was anger or sadness, or maybe something else. He walked her out, calling out to Lucile in the distance, when the flashing likes of the deputy's truck came up the road. Then he flipped a coin and snatched it out of the air.

"Heads. Angela, follow Lucile's voice back to your car. I'll talk to the cops."

"What do you mean she's coming?" Lucile projected into the fog, watching the strobing lights.

Then woman appeared before her, slender in a way that made her height deceptive, with pale cheeks marked by rose blush and thick black eye lashes, all of it calculated. What was not calculated was the miasmic slime that had congealed on her skin, and the recalcitrant tearing in her breɑth. Angela made her entrance, and it seemed she had a case of wiɳd intoxication. Her eyes were at once both dissociative and surgically focused. "What an annoying man. Flipping coins, saying it will be alright. None of this is alright. I don't know what Marianne saw in him. Or you."

"Excuse me?" Lucile shook herself and recovered. This was her chance. "I'm the fortune teller that came in a few weeks ago. I wanted to ask you about Alex."

"I can't go back."

"Why can't you go back?"

"I'll be trapped here forever." Angela chuckled, "just like you. A little tramp comes to town and finds a husband. How romantic. I hope you're happy with that idiot, Mari was. She had everything she ever wanted, she was just so perfect, and she always had him hanging on her every word. I don't get how anyone can stay in this tiny little shithole, with its tiny little problems. Constantly talking about business and tourists and gossiping about the same people day after day. Barely making enough to get by, just so you can own a shabby manufactured home in the middle of bumfuck Idaho surrounded by Jesus freaks."

Lucile was not shuffling. There was too much to take in, so she said the first thing that came to her lips, "he's not an idiot."

"Sure he is, he turned me down. I made him such a lovely casserole the other month and chatted away and he couldn't take a hint. The deputy got the hint, so did the delivery man and Jake Gatlin."

"What about your husband?"

"He's the biggest idiot of all. Thinking I'd stay. I made his home, I raised his children. He's an idiot to think I can't fend for myself. I have a life I need to live. I gave him chances, now he can suffer the consequences."

"Your kids," said Lucile, "what about your kids?"

The woman's eyes seemed to defrost ever so slightly, but whatever warmth she had was swallowed in a cold wind. "They only care about themselves. What do I do, fortune teller?"

Lucile pulled some cards off the top of the deck, she didn't show them, she just said, "The Tower. If you go back, there will be only disaster. You're the only one that can make yourself happy. So, get back to your car and don't stop until you get exactly what you ask for."

Those Decisions

Billie and the deputy were shocked at the sound of an engine thundering away into the field. He ran, "What happened?"

Lucile put her deck away and met his eyes. Then maybe to avoid them, or perhaps to indicate where Angela went, she looked away into the fog. "She didn't want to talk it out." The next hour was painful, breaking the new to Alex and watching him try to keep it together in front of his children was gut wrenching. Lucile seemed upset, and Billie consoled her, "it's not your fault."

Lucile didn't say anything.

After a while, he suggested they open the shop, if only to have something to do. He was surprised when she took to it so eagerly, but happy she did so. Perhaps she needed a distraction. Regardless, he announced the opening to the bar, and The Bartender even pitched in some free drinks for the first three patrons. The evening passed with a steady flow of the regulars going over to see the new attraction. He made plans to meet her back at the house later on and went to take care of the girls. Donna took Dorothy a blanket so that he might talk with her. While the sisters ate, he brought the witch her meal and reported on what happened. He could feel her eyes while they talked. Her glance was like a heat on his skin, more intense than Lucile's gaze.

Dorothy was in a state beyond exhaustion. It took her a moment to warm up to the conversation, pulling back just enough of her mind from the brink of arboreal dreams to form words. "It's a shame. I couldn't finish in time." Dorothy watched him looking over the branches of the tree. She mustered up the energy to ask, "how are you? Are you okay staying with us?"

Billie knew that was a sugar-coated way of asking about his adjustment to indentured servitude, but it didn't bother him, "I'm alright. I got a little claustrophobic but then I remember I didn't plan on going anywhere anyways."

"Would you feel better knowing I'm rooted here as well? The domain is tied to the land, and now I am to it."

He smiled, "that shouldn't make me feel better, but it helps. Can I ask you a question? What do you think about Lucile?"

"Donna has taken a liking to her-"

Billie waited for her to say something else as she drifted. Her voice was breathy and weak, her cadence almost wooden.

"This tree," she said.

"It's a nice tree." Billie observed the branches. "You grafted a few different varieties to it, and that one's a peach. Huh. I'm guessing magic is the reason you've got fruit in spring, right?"

Dorothy smiled, some lucidity returning, "trees are pragmatic. The trunk supports and branches, the branches photosynthesize for the trunk. A peach can grow on an apple tree with a healthy bond." She took a moment to breathe. "Did you know Marianne picked this tree?"

"Really? When?"

"Ruby started enchanting this twenty years ago. She said the little girl at Law's Orchard showed her the best one. She helped Ruby before I was adopted. Now I'm responsible for it."

There was a hint of sadness in her voice. Billie said, "I'm sorry you lost her. It's hard."

Dorothy stared into the deep sunset shafts piercing the leaves. "This tree has room for more branches."

Billie came home a little later than expected. He joined the girls for a couple rounds of Old Maid and Go Fish by Becky's bedside, until she was finally able to sleep. When he arrived, he found the light on for him, and

the door to Lucile's room cracked. With a knock it opened, and he found her looking at an old photo. It was a high school graduation photo of Marianne.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to snoop," Lucile said.

"No that's fine."

She looked over it one more time, "this is my first time really seeing her, She's gorgeous."

"She was."

Billie sat out on the couch for a while looking over his notebook. It read, "Where? Oh, where is the kitty cat? Where are paws going pitter pat? At home we'll feed you this and that. Oh please, come home, little kitty cat." Below the poem were a couple of scratched out stanzas and series of words including feel, hill, kill, kneel, and Lucile. The very same that crept out into the living room.

"Hey, what are you up to?"

Billie casually stashed his notes under the couch. "Just listening to some baseball for bed."

"Can I join?"

The two of them began chatting, made hot coco, and before long hours had passed. It was lovely night.

Flip & Fate, Episode 5: Shoot for The Star

Levi Lincoln needed to let go of the steering wheel before either it or his hands shattered. He was breathing heavily, even though he was safely parked in an old dirt lot in Atomic Springs, Idaho. The drive from Fort Ross had been fine, right until he got close and was swallowed by this horrible fog. However, that momentary stress was not what ailed him, if anything it gave him a sense of privacy, a small comfort here in his car far from home. His vehicle was a retro reproduction of a muscle car from way back in the information age, and the moment he saw it he knew he had to have it. It was just weeks after getting it that he became a man in the backseat, and some weeks later he now sat in the front baring the weight of that title.

The car itself was boxy with chrome trim and a vibrant cherry red paint job, except for the replaced passenger door and some scratches, but as long as he looked at it from the driver side it was perfect. It wasn't that common for high-schoolers to have cars these days. In history class he learned that it hadn't always been that way, but after the computers went down and the global information age came to an abrupt end the economy slowed. Even though America had been built around the automobile, it was one of the costs that got cut. That's exactly why he worked so hard at the golf course over the summer, and why he had to beg his parents, and why everyone in class wanted to see the man with cherry red chariot.

There were three girls. The first was Jena Harrow, who he took for a spin and subsequently endured the most pulse-poundingly awkward conversation of his life. He took her home and they haven't talked since. The second was Jenett Greenwood, who he had a better time with but couldn't figure out when to make a move. She seemed angry when he dropped her off. Then there was Elizibeth Crawford. He was a senior, she was sophomore from Atomic Springs, and they had never interacted before. Every moment was magical, or in hindsight just exciting because it was new. She was sweet and soft but bold. And bright. And warm. They started going on a lot of drives together.

Levi got out and began slowly walking into town. He could just barely hear some sounds of life in the distance. He reached the center of town and began to drift from one shop window to another, but he couldn't go inside, not while he had something important to do. Yet he was also unprepared to do it.

There air was strange, almost like it was whistling.

He went a little further. The fog drowned all view parting around him like curtains. He could feel moisture building up in his lungs. Just as he could make out the words on the window of the craft shop, his veins went ice colds. "Lizzy," that's what the women talking outside the door just said. He couldn't see them, and not until that name did, he pay attention to any of the mumblings about the weather or the town. But now it was the only thing he could focus on, the voices just beyond the next curtain.

"She hasn't said anything, but has the father contacted you? Or his parents?"

"No, at this point I hope they don't. To hurt my little girl like this," said Mrs. Crawford. "She's made her decision, and I've never been so proud of her, how hard she's working. If that little punk can't treat her like right, then she needs him like a fish needs a bicycle. I'll see to it, he'll never hurt my little girl again."

Levi no longer absorbed a single word the women said. He turned and walked away. Slowly at first, maybe instinctually afraid to make noise, but then he gathered speed, and he ran at full sprint, till the sidewalk dropped out from under him and he scraped himself along the road. He got up and hobbled away, feeling embarrassed and impotent, but more cautious of the fog.

He came back to that building he parked near, boarded up and abandoned, except this time he noticed a sign: Madam Delphina, Oracle of Fate. He wondered about it for a moment, although his mind currently could not produce useful thoughts. "Are you alright," asked the man the appeared behind him. Levi couldn't find the words. The man said, "come get your fortune told, you'll feel better," and stepped into the shop before him.

Levi came to the doorframe but was obscured by the man.

"Hey Billie," squeaked a little girl at the table with a woman in a decorative hood, "watch!"

Along with her mentor they performed some routine, part of the act maybe. It ended when the girl gently ran her fingers over the air above some cards, when suddenly she pulled back in horror. "Ew! It's slimy!"

The woman lit up, "oh my gosh, you did it!"

"You said it was strings," the girl protested as if betrayed. "It moved."

The woman tired for herself, "well maybe you're right. But look, you're not wet, you get used to it." Then she turned to Billie. "How'd things go?"

"Good job, Donna. We picked up the girls' schoolwork, their teacher is worried, really worried, thought we'd talk to Dorothy about it later. Becky and I went around for a bit, she was pulling all sorts things apart, but then she just got dizzy, and I carried home. She's resting again."

Donna said fearfully, "she's been yelling in her sleep."

The woman comforted her, "she'll get better soon."

Billie said, "she's not the only one that talks in her sleep."

"What's that mean?"

"You were a little restless last night. Who- who's Kenny?"

The woman paused, "someone that taught me how to play cards, and that I don't ever want to see again."

"Gotcha," said Billie in a tone that seemed unresolved. He finally stepped aside, "also, Lucile, you've got a customer."

Billie and Donna disappeared behind the curtain. Levi heard a door click shut as the woman began talking. "Come in, come in! Take a rest and let Madam Delphina divine the solution to your woes." The woman began shuffling and slipping cards in and out of her fingers, putting on a real show. However, Levi couldn't muster enthusiasm. She spoke more plainly, "how about a glass of water?" She called back and soon the girl came in with a big beer mug of water for him. He just stared into it, lost in the wavering reflection.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"I'm here to see a girl," he said, but the rest of the words got stuck in his throat.

That didn't bother the fortune teller, she dealt some cards and finished for him, "you've done something wrong. You should have committed before, but you were playing around. Now you're seeking to make things right."

He nodded.

"Shall I tell your future? Knowing what awaits you might make it easier."

"No. I can't think about that right now." Levi shifted in his seat and sent the water in his glass rocking side to side.

Madam Delphine scooped up her cards and made sure they would not get wet, before dealing again. "Then I shall tell you're past. You didn't really consider this girl's feelings. You know you used her for pleasure, but now she's-" the pause was not dramatic, not on purpose, "pregnant. Oh dear, you're so young."

He nodded and watched her deal again. Each time she placed the cards differently. This time she placed one in the middle and motioning a circle around it, place one above and below. She moved her fingers over them and thought for a while, before adding another on both the top and bottom.

"You are The Chariot, you've been foolish and rash, but you're not weak or evil. If you apply your strength correctly you can do great things. You're torn. Pulling you away from her is IV - The Emperor and Ten of Rings - Reversed. Towards her is Ace of Cups and XI - Justice. Your parents' approval and the life you were working towards is in conflict with a new path you can't ignore as being right. You're scared."

He thought for a while, still eyeing himself in the mug.

"Does that at least help organize your mind?"

Levi began to nod, and then again with more conviction. He chugged the whole glass. "Yeah. it does. I'm going to go walk around a bit more. Think through it. I'm not going home till it's done."

"Good luck."

Levi stepped back into the fog and began towards the shops. He held his head high. A moment later he heard shouting behind him. And as he turned, Madam Delphina fearfully grabbed him by the shoulders and spouted, "are you here to see Lizzy?!"

The woman, Lucile, was no longer playing a character. Levi would come to learn the truth.

"Whole town knows," he asked with dread.

"And waiting with bated breath," she replied. "Hey, don't leave, we'll come with you."

"To what?" Levi pulled away, "to-"

"I'm not going to tell you what to do."

Levi looked into the woman's eyes, her tone of voice reassuring. Her companion, Billie, just stood by and looked at her with trust.

Lucile said, "I'll be honest, I don't want Lizzy to get hurt, not any more than she already has. But, it has nothing to do with me, just you and her. So, just let me come along with you for the day. We'll show you around town, and make sure no one gives you any trouble, okay?"

Levi took it all in. It was hard to breathe, hard to think. The fog clouding everything did not eliminate distraction but instead invited fear of what might be within. Even now, his mind was pulled away by the sound of shouting, and cars, and a strange melodic whistle. He said, "I'm worried about her parents."

"So that's a yes," said Lucile.

Levi was still unsure.

Billie spoke up, "don't worry, man. We'll make sure you get a chance to do what you need to do. It's our job, sort of."

Those were the magic words.

The little girl said something about the air not being right and went home.

"It's almost time, can you feel the bubbling," Lucile whispered to Billie.

Levi couldn't bother to listen, these people were weird, and the effort was currently beyond him. He wanted more time to think, but now as he went down the sidewalk with them in tow the thoughts weren't coming. He just soaked in the anticipation. Lucile strolled up beside him. He was much taller, but in this moment, he felt small next to the older woman.

"So," she said tenderly, "I'd like to hear it in your own words. What would cause you to not give Lizzy chance?"

"It's not her," he blurted. There was awkward pause and gradually his face grew red, for how he shouted and what he'd said.

She turned back to the man and said, "someone's girl crazy."

He felt the heat on his cheeks. She urged him to keep talking. Eventually he did, and the embarrassment released with each word, "It's me. I'm an idiot for getting into this. I'm too young to have a kid, and I'm not ready for a wife."

Billie said, "but it's not her."

Levi nodded.

Streetlamps and the shop lights sat under the grey dimness of the fog, and a melodic humming carried through from the distance.

Levi asked, "what about you, miss- Lucile? How would you handle this?"

"I've never been where you are now, but I worry that I wouldn't be able to give my child the love they need," she sounded sadly firm. "But that doesn't mean you can't rise to the challenge."

Billie drew closer, "that's right. By the way, where are we heading?"

Levi said, "I don't know, I can't see anything. It's like this fog is trying to seep into my skin."

They shared a look with one another. Billie said, "we could go up to cemetery hill, get some perspective on things." They waited for a moment.

Levi said, "I think I want to find out where that music is coming from," and began walking. He asked, "what about you? Do you have kids?"

Billie said, "I don't, but I wanted to. Things didn't work out." He inhaled, with his voice a little deeper, he said, "what I want hasn't really changed, I'm just getting there slower than you is all."

Across the street, some footsteps fell in time with their own.

"She hasn't called me back," said a man. "When I told her what I did for work, well, I don't think I make enough money for her."

"That's rough, but it's her loss."

Rather, they were drifting towards the humming as well.

A woman appeared from nowhere and Levi bumped her shoulder. They both jumped and she squealed. She was a waitress from inside this cafe whose clouded signage he had missed.

Lucile said, "hey there, Jean. How is the weather treating you?"

"Sorry sir. The weather is killing me, just look at my hair! I haven't been able to get it under control is days. I was just coming out here to see where that sound is coming from."

"We were heading that way, do you want to come," asked.

"No, that's alright, everyone will think I'm a wreck. Let me know how it goes," Jean went back inside.

Levi shook his head and continued on.

Lucile whispered to Billie, "she's got some symptoms in her breath."

"Can we help?"

"We'll wait for Dorothy."

They reached the intersection and now the noise was clearer. It really was melodic, a whistle and a tone in harmony.

"My family isn't happy," Levi said. The air was so thick he felt like he had to speak louder just to get the words out. "If I bring an end to this, things might go back to normal."

Billie said, "I'm from Fort Ross you know. My parents weren't happy when I moved. Then we all got used to it. I usually see them once or twice a month, usually." He made it sound like he hadn't seen them in a long time.

"That's it?"

"Yeah, I told them this is where I wanted to be. It sucked, but things move on."

"Time heals all wounds," Lucile chimed in.

"Do I have to move here," Levi asked, both to them and to world itself. "That causes so many problems."

"No," said Lucile. "You could. Or maybe Lizzy could come to you. Or you could go both go somewhere else entirely."

"And leave everything behind?"

"Sometimes-" her voice betrayed something deeper, "you make sacrifices for what you want."

The fleeting flute and haunting horn grew louder as they walked down the street.

she said, "you know Lizzy had to really stand up to her parents because of this."

"Is that a guilt trip," the boy responded sharply.

"No. Just letting you know what she's been going through. It's not all that different from you. Except-"

Levi waited but she never finished the thought, she didn't need to.

Levi heard Lucile suddenly speak behind him, "you know I don't get cold."

Billie had wrapped his jacket around her. He responded, "oh yeah, Alright well give it back, I'm cold."

"No, it's mine now," she dashed ahead.

Levi caught something small, imperceptible to his conscious inexperienced mind, but very real to the primal mind deep within. He caught the way she pursed her lips, and pulled the jacket tight, and inhaled the scent, and the bright expression in her eyes. He locked his eyes forward, feeling embarrassed for some reason. They bantered in whispers for moment longer, which Levi tried to ignore them save for something that sounded strange.

She said, "this is a chance to practice. Focus on your skin, you'll warm up, maybe."

He said, "if it doesn't work, you'll have to warm me up."

Levi increased his pace.

They came upon some women by the alley. Levi stopped as their lumbering mastiff was blocking much of the sidewalk.

"Do you know where the music is coming from," asked Lucile, kneeling over to greet the dog with her loose fist.

"No, we were just wondering the same thing." She reintroduced herself, Janice, and they talked for a moment. She said, "by the way, what road are we on?"

"We're on third," said Billie.

"But we just passed third," said Janice. She huffed, "if my husband had met us like I told him too, we wouldn't be getting lost out here. He'd better not do this again. Oh, and who's this?"

Lucile started, "oh, this is Levi, he's-" And then she stopped cold.

Levi felt all eyes fall upon him, Billie nudged him, and they slowly inched away as Lucile made excuses and quickly wrapped up the conversation. While Janice was not as prolific as Sherry in her gossip but they were known to talk, and leaking the boy's identity prematurely could prove complicating. However, his name was revealed, and names can be powerful things.

A man standing on a bench notice them coming by and asked, "hey there, do you know what band is playing today?"

Billie replied, "we're wondering the same thing."

"I didn't here anything about it, and I can imagine they'd want to ruin their equipment like this. I swear I'm drenched. I would have bought a new jacket, but my wife blew all our money on flowers. I swear she just hates having money."

"Yeah. I hear that," said Billie unconvincingly. He transitioned, "we're going to head further down."

And they did so, the sidewalk dipping into another street. The man was set to follow them still curious of the music, but he soon disappeared, melting into the fog at the same time as growing burble of footsteps descended around them. It seemed everyone had the same idea, to follow the music, the only thing to do with the town bathed in mist. All business, all of life's daily ministrations, everything seemed like it could wait in this place that could no longer see the sun.

The music resonated in the mist, melodic swells that seemed to echo longer after they should had faded. People were growing closer together, funneling towards the source. Lucile and Billie drew near, unwilling to let their group be separated.

Levi said quietly, "what could she want from me?"

"Lizzy," clarified Lucile.

He spoke louder now, "what if she demands that I fix this? That I pay for everything, that- it's too much."

Billie and Lucile looked at one another for moment, Levi didn't see was silent expression were exchanged.

She said, "do you feel like you have to do everything?"

"It's my fault."

She didn't console him with empty words. She asked, "but you haven't talked to her, you don't know what she wants from you."

And then Levi remembered the words of Mrs. Crawford earlier that day. He asked, "what if she doesn't want everything from me?"

Lucile shifted her weight before speaking, like trying to balance on how to push him without over doing it. It was Billie that said, "the baby does." And she was freed up to say, "if you don't see her, you can't be sure."

They heard someone say, "where are we?" And they looked at one another, realizing they wondered the same. The crowd had taken the shape of a plodding procession, a disordered line going down a longer curved path of cemented stones.

Billie said, "the hot springs. This is the ramp down to the hot springs."

"Do bands usually play here," asked Lucile.

"No."

Levi found the railing and waited a moment, trying to make out anything of the hot pools below. He turned around to find Lucile acting strange. She was breathing slowly, eyes closed, listening, but something about her body language told him it wasn't to the music. He sensed, in some primal corner of his brain that this person in front of him was listening for danger. "Billie, listen to that and hold my hand." Now the man had his eyes closed, while she reached out to examine the people around them, tethered by their fingertips.

He said, "the bubbling?"

She returned, "that's the miasma, we're close."

"But the singing-"

Levi interrupted, "what singing?"

She grabbed him by the shoulders and looked him up and down, the turned back to Billie. "Something's really not right." A man tried to pass them by, she snagged him by the coat, "excuse me, do you know who's playing today?"

"No! no, I was just wandering over to take my mind off things. I didn't get the job. I still have another interview lined up, so I don't have to tell my wife yet."

"Why not tell her," Lucile's hands instinctively reached for her deck box.

"I don't want to see her disappointed."

He pulled slightly and she let him go and turned back to think. Levi was not included in the conversation and thought he might go a little further down while they talked. Suddenly she darted in front of him.

"Hang on," Billie came up too, "are you sure?"

Lucile said, "I've already caused Dorothy trouble, someone has to see about this."

He nodded, with growing conviction, "yeah okay. Levi, do you want to head back?"

"No, I want see the band."

She said, "let us go ahead."

He said, "yeah, ah, we'll pay."

A mumbling chorus descended among the crowd, humming back to lyrics Levi couldn't discern. The music was broken by the shuffling of feet and the path broken up by people looking out over the railing. He heard a woman say, "I should leave, he'll yell at me if I don't-"

All too quickly her voice was swallowed by the fog.

Levi saw refractions of light under the mist below, some large patches might have been the pools, the lines tracing around here are there were for ambiance, but then there were others. They came is different colors, some exotic, but what struck him as odd was that they were moving. Most swayed back and forth, maybe suspended string lights, but every so often one would drift off and disappear.

An energy seemed to move through the crowd, still the singing persisted, but even more voices made themselves known in the fog, mumbling and whispering as the mysterious band changed songs. A man's voice suddenly shot into his ear, completely unseen till standing a inch from each other. Levi startled and caught a short glimpse of his blank stare, before moving on.

The man was muttering, "I know it's her family, but I can't just be someone I'm not. It's not fair."

Lucile was feeling out into the fog, she gently put a hand on a woman's shoulder, but she didn't turn to respond. "Excuse me, how are you feeling?"

"I just need a break from the baby. The crying never stops. I had to get a sitter. He can't expect me to do it alone." The woman remained transfixed upon the lights and music below.

Levi passed her by, there was just enough light and shifting in the mist to see her face and deep bags under her eyes. He followed his companions.

Lucile said to Billie, "some people are showing signs of wiɳd intoxication-"

"We kind of expected that," he participated in her thoughts with a gesture.

"Right, but something else is here too."

As they continued down, step by step, they came to the entrance of the hot springs, a small office and counter. The door was wide open. Billie suddenly grabbed her shoulder, then eased off, as he hadn't meant too so strongly. "Hey, let me go first, okay?" She nodded. He went first into the office, filled with fog billowing in from outside and only thinned by the vents above.

A face arose from behind the counter. Billie and the man locked eyes for an uncomfortably long second. The man tilted his head and his gaze drifted away. He said, "the horn is lovely, isn't it? There's this woman, she came with her child a while back. We shared a lovely conversation about music. I wish she was here to listen with me. I didn't ask for her number because of the child. Getting involved with something like that, that kind of woman. Would people say it's wrong I-"

Billie just opened the door to the hot pools and waved them along as the man droned on, seemingly unoffended.

They stepped down the steps and finally arrived at the hot springs, and the weight came over them all. The light along the railing and hanging above them were smothered to seeming more like objects than illumination. The heat and fog and volume of horn and flute pressed down upon them. And something more, like a presence known but unseen lingered in their attention. They sank down as if to hide while taking their first steps. Billie would lead them around the pools to the far wall, where they might safely navigate further. The journey was indirect, given the various shapes of the pools and small groups of people blocking the paths. Each step was made with concern for something they each sensed but hadn't identified, Levi blamed it on the fear of falling into the water.

He followed and caught glimpses of Lucile as fresh waves of hot swirling mist lifted from the pool and stirred the thicker and colder fog. What he saw disquieted him. "Is everything okay," he asked.

"Yes. Everything is fine," she said, but did not look back.

Her head followed something moving near them, lurking here and there. Wherever she glanced it almost became more clear, as if something was rending the fog around them, patrolling around her and circling back to Billie. A change became apparent in the air, the condensation on his skin felt gross and his hair stood on end. Levi began to hang further back, Lucile acted as though she could not.

They made it to the wall carved into the rock and Billie looked back. "Are you good?"

"I'm good," said Lucile, as though making him believe that was important.

"You too, Levi, keep up," he said.

Along the wall they found a woman slumped against the rocks. She sang along to the melody, but her voice was weak, and she fell out of tune. Her eyes locked onto them as they passed, but she did not move. She pleaded, "why did they all say he wasn't good enough? I thought he was sweet, clumsy maybe. Why?"

"No drums, no beat. just melody, humming, and stamping of feet," said Billie. "They must be back on the grass patch."

No matter how close they came the band always sounded the same distance away. Levi nearly tripped over a man sitting on the edge of the water. He grumbled to himself, "it was just a pair of shoes on the floor. God, will I have to listen to this forever?"

As Levi righted himself, he found Billie had stopped and Lucile was speaking to someone. "Hello, good to see you again," she said, waving her hand as if to tell him to stay away. Indeed, Billie stepped in and blocked the view. She continued, "is Lizzy with you?"

Mrs. Crawford's voice met Levi's ears, and a great swelling in the music washed over him. A wave of vertigo sent him veering to the side, and he collapsed against the wall. It may have been that stumble, it may have been the heat, but it didn't matter, he was sick to his stomach. His mind and ears reconnected, and her comprehended the conversation once again.

Lucile spoke, "how do you think she'd feel if Levi came to visit?"

Mrs. Crawford declared, "I wouldn't let him! He'll only cause her more heartbreak."

"You don't know that for sure. If you can't take a chance, the baby will never know its father."

"The baby will know its grandfather. Better than some irresponsible boy."

Mrs. Crawford continued to let loose her feelings on the subject, and Lucile gradually calmed her down. Levi found it harder and harder to hear them over the horns resonating in his bones and flutes clinging to his skin.

Lucile and Billie began looking for him. He could see them but did not call out. Maybe for fear of being caught, perhaps he just felt too sick.

"Did he go deeper in," she said, spinning around likely seeing nothing but fog.

"I don't know. This is bad, isn't it," he asked, more so stating the obvious.

"I need to do something." Lucile turned and stepped forth directly towards the horrible source of the music.

Billie grabbed her by the arm. "Wait. Is this something you can do?"

"What, you don't think I'm good enough?" The flutes scratched.

"I think you're- fine."

"Dorothy will kill me if I let anyone else get hurt."

"It's dangerous, isn't it? You're not going to just leave me alone, are you?" The horns chewed.

"You'll be fine. You have her. I know you can see her," Lucile said with unwarranted accusatory venom.

"I try not to," Billie growled with a disgust that had an uncertain target.

Levi almost called out to them, but suddenly a precise uncanniness came over him. The way they stood talking, arguing, they did not face one another directly. He was filled with certainty that they stood together with a third thing, someone else that wasn't there, and the sight filled him with dread. He crawled, making it to the grass where he sped up, away from them, away from Mrs. Crawford, closer to the music.

He stayed next to the concrete, and still he could not discern where the sound was coming from, somewhere even further into the fog, farther onto the grass which seemed to slope down from the pools. The prospect of crawling downhill reminded him of the vertigo, he stood up.

It occurred to him that it was dark. All the lights had passed, and towards the music it only grew darker. It looked heavy, and his lungs were already uncomfortably full of hot vapor. Behind him, he could hear the mumbled chorus of onlookers, but through the mist his saw hundreds upon hundreds of shadows, which surely

couldn't be right. The light, or the lack there of was playing trick on him. He went toward the closest light, towards the final hot pool and the sparse illumination of a submerged bulb within, mostly covered by a man.

The Man in the Water floated alone. He had a scraggly beard and jaggedly smiled up at Levi with one front tooth much bigger than the other. He said, "I should have come here sooner. There's no reason you can't come alone, and with a car you can go anywhere."

"Yeah, I guess you can," Levi said, somewhat baffled. "How long have you been here?"

The Man in the Water said, "I've been here a long time, and I could stay forever too, just as long as the music keeps playing. You can get in if you like."

For a moment Levi began to list to forward, and he could imagine himself plunging into the water, but the swirling currents parted and he saw the truth. He saw the man's bloated body, skin stretching and threatening to tear apart, bulbus proportions bright red and melting into the water below.

Levi caught the railing and forced himself back, stumbling on the grass and slipping deeper into the fog. He regained himself and had only the slope to tell where he was. The music drowned out all sounds, surrounding, smothering, reverberating through the fog to shake through his whole body.

He cried, "stop! Stop! I can't hear this anymore!" He hugged himself, "I'm lost, I'm afraid. I'm sick of this feeling."

The Man in the Water exited stepped by him with wet splotching steps. "Just as long as the music keeps playing," he said walking down the grass, into the blackened fog and rumbling concert.

Levi watched him and wanted to cry out, but could say anything to The Man, it felt that saying anything else to him would only invite himself to slide farther down. Levi gripped to climb the slope, he bellowed, "I don't want to be afraid!"

Then from above the light shown brighter, the fog was churned and thinned above by a herald of the wind. A single breach opened, a beam of sunlight cast down upon his feet. A voice that was bright cut through the accursed flute. A voice of conviction cast aside the bastard horn. A voice as sweet and unfettered as the spring winds called from above, "Levi!"

He stepped into the light.

Even in the shadows, there could be no mistake. Sunbeams adorned the penumbra of the many curling locks of Elizabeth Crawford’s hair. She said, "a little birdie told be you were here. Did you come for-" She trailed off as the flutes persisted, almost as an invitation for him to speak, but maybe as the slightest show of insecurity.

He could not allow the latter to be true, not after she had delivered him from darkness. "I came to see you."

She smiled, and nearly jumped for joy, holding onto the railing far above where the path to the hot springs began. She said playfully, "then what are you doing here?"

"I just keep thinking about all the things that could go wrong. I couldn't see you," and that feeling of fear writhed in the pit of his stomach once more. But here and now he could not respond to her joy with sorrow, he stomped his foot up the slope and finished, "yet."

She spoke softer, the joy not gone but unable to shine alone forever, "any problems that come up, we can fix them together."

The fear in his stomach was consumed, wicked into his hot red blood and scattered by the flame of his heart.

Lucile, Billie, fifty-some-odd citizens of Atomic Springs, and most importantly Mrs. Crawford saw the boy rise from the fog. They watched the teenager scramble over the lawn and around the decorations. The clouds of mist lifted as the young man jumped upon the rocks and bricks and climbed the great retaining wall.

They watched the expecting mother reach out and pull up her Levi, they watched the father embrace his Lizzy over the rail.

They watched them kiss and then looked away as the teenagers became a little too impassioned. Mrs. Crawford had to rush to break it up.

"That is enough," she hissed, stealing a glance back at the crowd. "Young man, come home with us and will wait for Lizzy's father. Then we'll all have a nice talk."

"Yes mam," he said, his voice a couple notches deeper than before.

XXI - The World

Billie surveyed the crowd around the hot springs, it seemed most everyone was confused about why they were even there. He too felt a little odd about how everything had transpired, or how he felt a moment ago, the was something almost imperceptible sickening about the whole ordeal. He found Lucile fixated on the last ghastly cloud of shadow clinging unnaturally at the far end of the grass. The music was fading, swimming away to impossible spaces beyond the fog, everyone else seemed oblivious to the waning vestige.

He said gently, "hey, what's wrong."

She spoke in a whisper, as if the words didn't want to leave the safety of her throat, "I'm watching it leave. Making sure." She stood for a while as the people around them began to chatter, growing disquieted by an ill wind moving overhead. Lucile turned towards him and said, "you were right. There was nothing I could do."

"Nothing I could do either. I just wanted to do nothing together."

She smiled, "can you feel that? We need to go see the girls."

The wiɳd swept across Atomic Springs to reclaim the foul miasma it had left, which was now saturated, volatile, and simmering. Together the æther currents mixed and the event began. It was once called a concɛrt, although the term fell out of favor because it implies orchestration but at this level such events were anything but. A great exothermic force spread across the surface of the miasma, and a massive updraft engulfed the town. The trees rocked, the animals panicked, the birds huddled upon the ground. The miasma erupted, dissolving back into the wiɳd and bubbling into invasive soɹnds. The local whispɛrs and mδans had grown weak, and these newcomers were born fat and festering.

The poor people of Atomic Springs had not seen the sun in days, and now as the sky suddenly cleared, tantalizing them with rejuvenation but the wind began to howl inexplicably. Everyone reacted differently, but something in the air set the instinct of the primal brain ablaze.

Billie and Lucile had ample time to observe the oddities of people’s behavior, even though rushing across town. Passing the shops, and houses, and park, many were coming outside. Some were covering their ears, others were scowling, some looking this way and that to find unsourced voices, and others were twitching and lashing out at what must have seemed like the world's most elusive mosquito.

Donna came running up near the turn, she was elated to see them but out of breath. She tried to stammer out the Dorothy needed help, Billie scooped her up and they made haste. Becky was outside, diffusing soɹnds in a frenzy, more so ripping asunder in a manic rampage, sparring no effort to judge their origin or value. Donna stayed to help her.

Lucile entered the hidden chamber of the tree and popped right back out, shouting to Billie to find a blanket as she rushed to grab something else. He brought a spare comforter and paused by the door, but Lucile called him in, there was no time to waste. However, in his haste he failed to mind his eyes, and got a full naked view of Dorothy and her assets. After getting the blanket to her, he had the distinct realization that Lucile was staring angrily at the side of his head. He did not make eye contact.

Dorothy was all at once deathly and lucid. Her creaking movements incongruent with her vibrant dancing eyes. "My legs," she said.

Lucile examined underneath. "It's even worse than I thought."

Billie leaned in to see and pulled away on instinct. The horror of seeing another person injured jolted through his mind, followed by an uncanny terror upon discerning the truth. Along the underside of Dorothy's legs and buttocks were roots, wooden growths melding into her through bark like calluses, all along flesh that had turned a sickly pale and green color.

Dorothy said, "my feet."

Lucile revealed what she had been tasked to fetch, a pair of gardening sheers. Billie sat back as she went to work and looked upon Dorothy, this woman he'd known for years. These past weeks had revealed many things to him, but seeing this unnatural transfiguration really made it sink in. He saw that her long hair was not just messy, it was tangling around twigs, little branches were sprouting from her scalp, some even had little leaves. Then he saw the discomfort on her face, the clenching of her teeth as Lucile cut the roots of her feet free. She was a witch, and while he didn't understand everything she'd done, she had paid a price for it.

"Here, let me," said Billie.

He took the sheers and with one smooth motion severed a particularly large root as close the skin as he could so that she might be able to walk. Dorothy winced and moaned in pain, but nodded her head, more so to maintain her own conviction than instruct them. Lucile held Dorothy tight and supported her awkward sitting posture. Billie pushed her legs little by little, snipping one root then the next. Eventually, Dorothy was able to start pulling some out of the ground with her own strength. However, the last one was the biggest and most painful. It emerged from the base of her spine, like a tail, and from the angle and texture it was clear that it led back into the roots of the Tree of Murmurs. Billie had to squeeze and rotate the sheers several times, and axe would have been more appropriate. Dorothy's breathing grew panicked and pained. When it finally severed, blood leaked from the wood.

Lucile ran to get medical supplies. When they we ready to set out, Dorothy found walking to be too painful. Billie wrapped her up and lifted with all his strength.

"Can I help," Lucie gestured to carry her with him.

"Get the door, get the door!" Billie hyperventilated all the way to the car.

Lucile pulled open the door for Billie and began looking for the girls. She spun all around and almost began to panic, till she realized they were on the ground the trees at the edge of the yard. Her heart dropped, Donna was kneeling over her collapsed sister. She rushed over, immediately offering comforting words to the little one, "it's okay, it's okay."

But when Donna looked up, she was unfazed. "I know. I can take care of her."

There was a brief moment of figuring if they sure spare time to care for Becky. Billie started the car and pulled around. Dorothy could hardly talk, but her eyes said not leave them. Becky gurgled, "I'm okay, I'm okay," and snatched another miasmic whisper from the air. Lucile took the girl's hand in her own and soothed the hellbent child as best she could.

"Go on ahead," she declared.

Billie said, "stay safe."

His destination was the cemetery, and while it was close, getting Dorothy there meant driving up the thin gravel road that cut between the hills to ascend the slope. On any other day it would have been unremarkable. People were all around, agitated and curious. Cars were haphazardly parked on curbs, and a crash blocked the central intersection. Billie followed a fire truck on a detour through the neighborhood, seeing smoke on the far end of the main street, possibly the bar. Approaching the obscure road to the cemetery, he mounted the curb to drive around a murder of crows blocking the way, staring at him as if taking to the air would be worse than being flattened. Disorder was gradually turning into havoc.

Just as he came to where the asphalt ended, an old man came stomping out into the road. Billie eased into the brakes, but the man turned and move towards the car. As Billie jolted to a stop, the man began pounding on the hood, "slow! Down! Slow! Down!"

Dorothy groaned in pain, every one of her freshly severed growths scraping and twisting on the seat.

Billie got out, hair stood up on the back of his neck. The old man was already yelling something at him, which his ears understood but his mind wasn't ready to grasp. He thought to make a defense, he thought to make and explanation, he thought to deescalate, he thought that he had no time for this, he thought this man insane, he thought he had a mission to accomplish, he felt concern for the woman he was escorting, he felt a charged frustration building.

He loomed over the man, old and feeble and shrinking by the year. He would not stay in the way for long. But with the exhaling of his own hastened breath, Billie realized the old man had gone quiet. The seconds became long. Sirens were wailing, people were shouting, a crashing sound echoed off the buildings.

"Excuse me," he said through almost clenched teeth, growing more relaxed with every word. "I need to go to the cemetery."

The old man staggered away. Billie took a deep breath and watched to make sure he made it clear of road. It almost looked like some kind of haze followed the man, regardless.

They drove on.

Lucile provided strength but otherwise let Donna take charge of caring for her older sister, which she was proud to do. Lucile wandered, trying to find something to do. She thought of going outside to diffuse the rampant swarming soμnds, but it what was the point? There was too much, and Dorothy intended to solve it soon. Habit brought the deck of cars to her hands, and she began reading the fortune in the air at the kitchen table. She dealt and read thrice over to no satiation. Anxious and tired, she thought about taking a nice shower, but she would need her towel. That towel wasn't here. She glanced around this house, all its things, both mundane and personal. She felt a simple fact crash over her: this was not her house, and neither was the place where she was keeping the rest of her things.

She sat and waited for something to change.

Dorothy Everseed stepped onto the grass, already awake from the pain but struggling to summon up her vigor. This was it, after this it would be over. After weeks of work every second was a challenge, but she disciplined herself. She muttered to herself, "do what you must." She let the blanket fall and walked out the edge of the hill to see the town, to give herself more leverage against the weight of the domain.

The town itself was in an uproar. Everywhere people reacted to unseen sensations spilling over. Another car crashed below. A fist fight broke out. A child was wailing. Dogs were running wild through the streets and gnashing at each other's throats. While individually everyone was having a bad day, together in compounded into chaos. Wispy patches of fog encircled and spun round the buildings as a great whirl lifted upwards. Invasive whispɛrs, groωlss, and mδans erupted into the air and rained back upon the land. Such a density of activity gave birth to soμnds greater still. A twisted amalgam was forming in the sky above.

Dorothy would not let it be. She had spent these past weeks usurping and mastering the domain, her connection was secure. However, using it on this scale was far beyond anything she'd ever done, under different circumstances she would not have done this alone. She'd simply have to do it anyways. What was once her breαth vibrated the strands, and what was once her circμlation inflated them. She slowly raised her arms, lifting higher and higher, pouring herself into the wiɳd and allowing it to filter through her. Once the siphon began, the process continued on its own. Many interweaving channels swelled and bloomed into the sky, all across Atomic Springs the domain arose, slowly at first. The Clouds of miasma weighed down upon her, but she gave on more might thrust and the domain expanded explosively. The miasma was shred, the wiɳd slowed, many soμnds both invasive and local were diffused or launched into the wild.

Billie could feel it for the first time, a viscus blanket on his skin. Donna and Becky felt relief as things returned to normal. The people of Atomic Springs were suddenly rid of spasms plaguing sense and instinct. Dorothy witnessed her own stalwart green mingling into the aurora of the wiɳd. There were holes that needed patching, and the outer edges had become frayed, but it would do. Lucile felt a familiar sensation wash over her, the feeling of another person pressed against her skin, molesting her breαth, baring down upon her.

Dorothy collapsed. There was so much noise about the town that Billie didn't notice the thud. Then a quiet voice occurred in his ear. He looked back to see a naked woman flopped beyond the gravestones. He took the blanket to her. Her eyes were awake, looking for him, yet not even her lips were moving. He heard Dorothy's voice in his ear as though coming through a strange and awful radio signal.

"Take me home. And stop looking at me," she commanded, completely and utterly spent.

"Just making sure you were breathing."

All together the Everseed Coven spent the evening at the Marsh's patchwork home. Billie took it upon himself to work on some repairs, and the girls rested. The domain had diffused almost everything, and while it was unfortunate to cast out the good with the bad, the natural soundscape would in time reform out of the wiɳd as overseen by Dorothy. Lucile was mildly impressed that even now the sleeping steward continued to work. She quietly closed the bedroom door and began shuffling. She sampled Dorothy's breαth and read her fortune.

In her present was responsibility and a great triumph of endurance. In her future was much hard work, building a foundation under a long and foreboding shadow of uncertain times to come. In her past, matricide. Dorothy Marsh, the Four Handed, head Witch of the Everseed Coven and Steward of Atomic Springs, Keeper of the Tree of Murmurs, and usurper, would do what she must.

Lucile took care to adjust the blankets and checked her temperature, and lastly, she unfastened the crucifix pendant and placed it on the nightstand, so that Dorothy might sleep a little better.

Billie paused under the streetlamp to wait for Lucile to catch up. It was silent that night, even the sky was too tired to bother after the day's commotion. They hadn't left until they were absolutely sure that Becky and Dorothy would be okay, and preparing Donna just in case. It was a long day, but something in Lucile's demeanor was less tired and more sorrowful. She looked up at him, just wondering why he stopped. He held her hand and started walking again. They didn't talk, he slowed to match her pace, she quickened gradually. For a moment she leaned on him as they maneuvered around a fallen tree.

With a key in the door, he turned to her. He hadn't any special words to say. "Crazy day, huh?"

Suddenly she came up on her tip toes and wrapped an arm around his back. He reacted on impulse, before he understood what was happening. She kissed him and moved her fingers over his to turn the key and pull him inside.

XVI - The Tower

Billie awoke late in the morning to feeling of the sun on his eye lids and overheating beneath the comforter. The bedroom was mess, his clothes strewn all over. While he was still tired in body and mind, his soul was filled with virility and satisfaction.

However, she was not there.

The house was silent. He tapped his knuckles on the guest room door, but she was not there. Her bag and clothes were not there. There were many little signs, memories in his mind linking together. He went to Marsh house, he only found the coven groggily trying to make it through the morning. Lucile was not there. He went to the bar, its third floor burned out for a second time, but the shop untouched. The tip jar was gone, and Lucile's key sat on the table.

He slumped onto the floor of the empty shop, within the empty bar. He couldn’t bear to think of going back to his empty home.

She was gone.

The Fool -reversed

Before the dawn the air was crisp and cold, Lucile D. Rogers charged her breɑth to warm herself. She dragged the dolly holding all her belongings behind her, jittering down the road.

A voice on the wiɳd molested her ear. "You're leaving," Dorothy asked. Lucile entertained the question for a moment, wondering what it really meant. Maybe it was this, perhaps it was that. She stepped forward and slipped out of the domain, out the town, onto the freeway, onward to somewhere else. That was the easiest way to answer the question.

It wasn't long before the mountains and felids were blanketed in warm sun and heavy clouds, a drifting copulation of light and shadow in serenity. As she walked, Lucile watched only her steps.

The End

Aftermath: Request

The horror unleashed in Dunwich Idaho have not only revealed critical information and incited panic among the public, it has also distracted our own investigators. All three neighbors of Dunwich: Shoshone Falls, Fort Ross, and Atomic Springs all experienced exceptional events around the same time, leaving Dunwich without help, possibly enabling this entire disaster. Six months later none of it has been explained.

The smallest town, Atomic Springs, with an approximate population of five hundred, has affected the least people and resources. However, upon review a report from our single clerk stationed there, I believe the events are incredibly suspicious. Neither the Steward nor secondary contact were available during a missing person case. The Steward also seemingly allowed the town to fall prey to a magical storm that the regional meteorological authority recorded as being no threat. The Steward has not filled any explanatory paperwork.

The town endured a slew of property damage including crashed cars, damage infrastructure, and house fires. Multiple men were arrested for assault and battery, although none were charged. One elderly gentlemen suffered a heart attack, he died three weeks later. Two other people had to be hospitalized. Finally, the vehicle of a missing person on our list from Dunwich, one Oliver Hearing, has been found at parked near the hot springs. The interstate records show he visited the day of the event.

We will likely never again have control over knowledge over magic. The public will lay awake at night thinking of what lurks outside their walls. Malicious actors will find new horrible ways to bring suffering to others. An economy can’t thrive without some level of trust. We can show the public that the horrors of Dunwich were an exception and not the rule. We can show that the GLO is worthy of their trust.

It is for these reasons I request to be assigned to investigate Atomic Springs.

Senior Field Agent Josh Sterling.

A History of a Crafty Witch

Ruby Ackerman was born to be a witch. She carried lineage of Jade Ackerman, an assistant of the Lichenfall coven. Her father was Todd Evenfang. When she was eleven years old both of her parents died. A deer of Mad Crown entered their town's domain and her father was expected to be the front line against it while the Steward cast spells from safety. Her mother accompanied him for support. Ruby was told that neither lived. Given what she learned of Mad Crown later in life, she began to suspect that her parents did survive the encounter, but were not allowed to walk away. Maybe that was for the best, but couldn't they have at least said goodbye?

Ruby, now an orphan, was sent to the Evenfang School for Coven Unity where she would spend the rest of her adolescence. He time at school was initially brutal. She was bullied, she was mocked, she was treated like a burden by the staff and caretakers. She wasn't the first orphan to make the school home, none of the others were treated well either. One such orphan was Joan Cromwell. Ruby and Joan did not like each other, they were near opposites, but they became friends of convenience and then rivals. Together they proved the caretakers wrong, distinguishing themselves as excellent students and mentors. Lacking mothers of their own they became mothers to younger children. They made themselves into aspirant apprentices that the school could be proud of, that could be traded off to other covens in exchange for support when the time came. Their treatment improved.

Ruby's passion for excellence was not fueled by this alone. Among the many cabins of the school she could often be found in the library where she was enamored with the tales of witches from long ago. She, like many others, became fascinated by the Three Immortal Witches. There was Amel the Traveler, who's journeys across the globe were suspected to go back even further than the Black Century. There was the Lady of Les Pavúkov and her coven, most reclusive but never defeated. Finally there was The Fire Witch in all her searing glory, possibly the most powerful of all witches. Inspired by these tales, Ruby's standards for herself were not lax. Joan was set on reclaiming her parent's legacy in the Morgana Coven, through a cousin of her late mother. Ruby had other schemes. Thus the sisters parted, they exchanged letters for a time.

Ruby went on to study under Liliana Sternwraith. As an assistant she carried out her work and learned the deeper fundamentals of their auramancy. After a year she asked to go out and learn more so that she could become a more well rounded witch. She also asked her master if she could approve Ruby's naming when the time came? This carried two implications. First, that she intended to become a generalist, given her track record she would be a valuable workhorse for any coven she joined. Second, that she would be returning to the Sternwraith.

Then she went to study under Arthur Gorn, where she learned the finer details of enchantment. It was during her time here that she met Joshua Marsh. The two of them hit it off and Ruby kept in touch with him, although at a distance. One day She asked her master if he would approve her name when the time came, and set off again to learn more.

Finally she studied under March Evenfang, a tree witch. She always had an interest in plant magic, and this was where she gained substantially more skill in managing the interactions of wiɳd and flesh. Again, she asked her master to approve her name when the time came. Then she returned to the school. Under her old teacher she took her test of proving, with her three masters invited as witnesses. March and Arthur had to send apprentices, Liliana was able to attend in person and immediately grew suspicious but kept quiet.

Ruby passed her test and announced to her teacher that she would like to hold her own name and found her own coven, the Everseed. When Liliana heard this she erupted into cackling, utterly infuriated and proud of the trick her apprentice had pulled. The potential conflict over an apprentice wasn't worth while for the covens, and so Ruby swindled her way into independence. Liliana applauded her scheme but also warned that she had now burned all her bridges within the Grand Old Coven.

Ruby met with Joshua and disappeared for a time. One day Ruby Everseed petitioned the GLO for a charter of stewardship. There was old research town, home to the world's first electricity producing nuclear reactor, long since decommissioned. All that was left was an old man spending his twilight running a pit stop on the highway. The GLO would never spend such money on protecting something that would soon fade, however, whether by luck or by fate there had been an open non-urgent call for a Steward for that place from long ago. All the paperwork was just sitting there, and when Ruby's offer to accept the minimum came across the senior clerk's desk, the functionary did his job and stamped the forms.

They began rebuilding the town. Ruby's dowsing uncovered the hot springs, and her letters to a certain witch in northern Wyoming may have helped them grow it into a small business, although she never mentioned this to anyone, she wished she could have done it herself. She tired to make friends with the witches of her region. She was unsuccessful save for Eli Ravenwood, the Steward of the neighboring town of Dunwich. He was a peculiar man guarding a peculiar town, and he did so with no domain. This meant he was able to visit on occasion, and while the conversation was intriguing he wasn't much of a social connection. He was a black sheep among the Ravenwood, and his post in Dunwich was practically exile. One day he went mad, at least that's what Ruby presumed from his letters. He stop writing and never visited again.

Throughout her career Ruby intended to make her mark on the world of witches. Her central plan was to create something that would allow a witch to functionally add more wδrds to their Name, such that the limitations of spell casting under pressure might be broken. While she did not think this would not fundamentally change the world, it could make a difference for witches encountering the dangers of the wild and dark. She researched and developed the design all while stewarding her new town of Atomic Springs. Her progress was slow and unsatisfying. She had to build her domain, not just maintain it. By the time she was in a position to dedicate herself to research, decades had passed. This research culminated in the Tree of Murmurs.

She hit a wall in regards to the Name, as all who study it do, but Ruby was crafty. She incorporated the very mechanism of the Lock which reads the Name to produce a persons inherited wδrds and inscribe their nurtured wδrds. If she could not encode new things upon the Name, why not the body? Her final design would take a soμnd, seal it in a tree branch such that it would produce fruit that would then encode the corresponding wδrds into the eater's stomach. However, the tree's incredible complexity required constant upkeep.

That was in addition to all of the many unanswered problems. Would the effects last? Would they damage the tissue or cause cancer? What about something more than a single wδrds, could a fruit impart an entire spell? Would that even be desirable?

Ruby, quite late in life, adopted her first apprentice, a girl named Dorothy whose witch heritage came with a mutation, her body was passively casting her maternal wδrds into her circμlation. This, combined with some of the usual genetic factors produced a form of Sternwraith Syndrome. To use another human, a child no less, and as a lab rat was a dark thing. Ruby knew that, but she was growing old, and her life's work required her efforts to spent on upkeep, otherwise she'd have experimented on herself. The girl's condition provided the excuse. Ruby created two fruits to complement her errant mutation. The Tree of Murmurs gave the girl the tools she needed, and with training she was able to give her brain functional magically assisted connections to her wraith-flesh. The endless spasms and sensations came to an end.

Upon eating a third fruit Dorothy became very sick, her body rejected it, and with so many unknowns at play, Ruby did not dare to push it further without careful consideration. Progress came to an end as Joshua passed away, leave her without help in all the other facets of life. Then the Tree of Murmurs became unstable, demanding even more attention. She refused to loose her life's work, and so she became bound to it in a very literal sense.

Sadly, the last years of her life saw a sharp decline in her health. She finished her tree without ever fully understanding everything about it. That task would be left to her heir. In the Spring of 2678, Ruby met her fate.

She did not achieve greatness in her life time, but her work persisted in the hands of Dorothy. Time would tell just how much impact Ruby Everseed had on the world.

Moment: Rumors

"Oh my gosh, have you heard! Have you heard about the bear-man?" Sherry clutched the sides of the small folding table, her eyes wide with faux terror.

Lucile idly shuffled her cards, "I overheard something about a strange fox."

"The one with the tumor? Poor thing. Anyways, I was over at Wilma's, and her husband, Luther, mentioned the other day, right before sunrise he said, he saw a huge man standing up on cemetery hill. Big enough to be a bear he said. But I've asked everyone and no one else has heard anything. Gosh, Dorothy has missed out on how lively it's been."

Lucile laid out some cards, "good news, no bear-man attacks in your future."

"Let's hope not. Things have already been strange enough lately." The shared a split-second look and she continued, “including you, In a good way.”

Tidbit: Sternwraith Syndrome

It was Marcus Sternwraith who studied and explain the phenomena of the spectral biology. The human body in rare cases, was known to manifest ghostly limbs through an unknown magic. In the wake of World War One, the witch physician discovered it was no magic at all. Marcus Sternwraith shared his shocking findings, which would go to influence the study of physics in the coming century.

The essential conclusion of his work is that the universe has more than dimensions than humans perceive. A discovery as complex and frightening in ramification as it is simple to say. The cases of spectral limbs are anatomy situated at a higher forth dimensional elevation that happen to lower into the three dimensional realm we are familiar with.

Marcus Sternwraith studied extra-dimensional human anatomy for the remainder of his life. He found that there were a variety of different growths a person might have, including completely different body plans. Although, the vast majority of humanity, across all races and ethnic groups, were those with a standard layer of what seemed to be protective hide. He documented the many manifestations of wraith flesh, but was never able to discern a taxonomy. Most importantly, it seemed that the majority additional limbs or other growths were merely vestigial.

Sternwraith Syndrome was that of rare cases where the body became unconsciously aware of its wraith flesh and began to interact with it, in something akin to phantom limb syndrome, except the limb is not so very phantom after all. This could occur by number of mean or a combination there of. Marcus passed away before fully understanding all the mechanisms.

Credit must also be given to Archer Gorn, who collaborated in crafting specific enchanted mirror works that allowed Marcus to examine the fourth dimension. In his personal journal Marcus credited Archer with multiple genius suggestions, what they were is unknown.

A Bird’s Eye View

A long time there was a Steward name Clementine Ravenwood, who watched over the town of New Serenity, West Virginia.

Clementine was a lonely woman. She had a husband who was strong and loyal, but ultimately distant. He kept their secret and would repair the charm line when asked, but otherwise kept his distance from all witchcraft. On Sundays as the church bells rang, Clementine took silent agonizing note of how he embraced his mother with a tenderness she had not felt towards herself. But she endured.

Clementine could not bare children, for she held the core of the domain within her uterus, the part of a woman's body unessential to her own life and adept and passively managing the great veil that hung over New Serenity. Clementine tried to migrate the domain core, she thought to give up a kidney or lung, but whenever she tried she would become ill and that would also be reflected onto the town. She and her husband tried for children, and silently she prayed that she was barren, for she new that the intensity of the magic within her would surely torture the baby to death or worse. She never showed signs of pregnancy, both thankfully and forlorn. She endured, at least it made her marriage easy to manage.

Clementine Ravenwood was a witch, born and raised in a god fearing home, but she had eaten so much more of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil than those around her. She was well studied and regimented, handling all chores and maintenance on routine and addressing issues the moment the arose. Clementine did the same for her spiritual life, attending church and saying her prayers out of dry practice, quietly hoping that if a god watched over her it was good enough. It was familiar and safe, and when she was tempted by whispers of power and forgotten gods through the words of her birds and the witches afar, She resisted that false hope. The gnosis teased her with happiness, but she endured.

Clementine Ravenwood belonged to an old coven, one with deep roots in Europe. The townsfolk called her the bird lady and she could not be offended, for it was true. Her day was spent caring for the crows and the ducks, and operating a messenger pigeon service, antiquated as it was. While the normal folk only ever used it as a novelty, Clementine held a crucial position among the witches of West Virginia and beyond, managing familiar birds that went between the covens of the area carrying news and conveying secrets among those in shadows. Ultimately it was thankless work, but she endured.

Clementine and her husband had to hike in the dark to the outskirts of the town, at least once a years, to find beasts deranged from foul wiɳd and other ghoulish things best not remembered. She sensed the dangerous presence through the domain and readied their things, leading her husband to the target and holding her hands over her ears as he did with gunpowder what she could not with magic. She would take from the corpse anything the other witches might want, and spend the next day cleansing the area through her domain. Her husband often making excuses to the neighbors that she had fallen ill yet again. No one even knew that they should thank her.

And how did she endure?

Clementine liked talking to the birds, hearing all the gossip of their feathered world. She also liked to watch people, often in macabre fascination, through the domain. She watched the marital abuses that no one else could see or interfere with. She watched the child with a devil's mind born to decent parents that could not handle him. She watched the godless heathens that indulged in every vice they could that acted as though the world was unfair when their actions left them destitute. She watched the widow cry for the logger that never came back. She watched the lonely man that could never maintain a friendship let alone court a woman somberly resign himself to be forgotten among the crowd.

Clementine endured knowing every hardship and evil that plagued the people under her care. And yet, it was not enough. She tired to be thankful for having it better than others, but there were others who had it better

than her. Clementine endured through will, holding herself together at the seams, gradually fostering a darkness within until she was full to to burst.

Then came that fateful Halloween that would change her forever.

Clementine waited near the door of her home with a bowl of candy for the children, quietly meditating and watching the town through the domain. With her power and her crows she mischievously teased the people, causing all sorts of spooks and scares and bumps in the night. It was after a group of children took their candy and left that she sat down to focus herself again, and whether by luck or by fate, the first thing she notice was a man talking to a child. The man had moved to New Serenity just earlier that year and had thus so far been completely unremarkable. But there are things in this world far worse than magic and monsters.

Clementine watched the man lead the child away from the street lights, away from the crowds and the parents. She watched man remove the child's costume. This was something she could not endure.

What happened after would only be known in full to her, and perhaps that man but he would never be able to speak of it. He was seen running through the streets, screaming in fear seemingly in response to someone one that no one else could see. Clementine's husband found her gone with the front door left open. All around the town people heard a woman's voice echoing in the night, but knew not who is belonged to or where it came from. The child wandered back to his parents, who asked about his costume and gradually fought their own reactions so as to not scare their child who failed to understand. Then the sounds of crows and pigeons and ducks cried out in pandemonium as the tree's suddenly shuttered in the wiɳd.

Trick or Treating ended early that night, and the townsfolk held up inside under a strange unconscious awareness of something wrong. The police quietly patrolled the streets. In the morning the man's body was found on the bridge at the edge of town. His eyes were torn out, his skin was blotched with strange burn marks, a cut ran from his sternum down to his genitals, and his innards were being picked out by crows.

That Sunday the sermon was interrupted by the wailing sobs of Clementine Myers. Her husband had to take her home.

Clementine spent more time with her birds after that, often babbling gayfully to her favorite crow and being followed around by a flock of pigeons cooing in the trees. She spent time in the peach orchards, and walking afar to the very edge of the domain where she met a neighboring witch from the next town. Soon Mr. and Mrs. Myers were seen about town with an adopted child, and at first this was novel and pleasant news, but is soured as people found Clementine's relationship to her ward very odd. She was all at once dominating and clingy, as if she was training a pet.

It was Clementine's husband that took action. He took time away from work to see to his wife, going on long walks on the outskirts of town, but never near the bridge. He took his new son fishing far away. The pair of them would gain a reputation at the lake for always having a crow perched on their boat, their little 'crow boat' as it were. Gradually Clementine seemed to return to her old self, and her son would grow up to be a respectable if reclusive young man, taking more to his adoptive mother's work than his father’s.

Clementine Myers became less lonely, spending more time with the women about town as a prolific gossip. All in all things were good, although there were on occasion moments with Clementine that gave people pause. Underneath her rather needy exterior was a certain darkness, an almost sadistic sense of resentful justice. She could also be very strict around children, perhaps a maternal instinct.

One day Clementine Ravenwood retired, and retreated from the world. Her time as Steward was catching up to her, the mutations were no longer concealable. She brought in another Ravenwood apprentice suitable to take over the domain.

There were good days and bad. With the support of those around her, and maybe some eyes above, she endured.

Tidbit: A Witch's Proving

The Grand Old Coven is a decentralized organization. The coven holds many taboos but has no enforcement or oversight mechanism. Witches must deal with a variety of problems, and being in the good graces of another coven with different skills could save lives. Thus, peer approval is the only real mediator of action.

It is the tradition of the Grand Old Coven that an aspirant earn her name in a rite of her master's choosing and overseen by one additional witch from a different coven preferably of a different name. If the Master and Overseer agree, then the aspirant will be made a witch, and deemed fit for work. Work is often assigned by seniority, or rather avoided by seniority, with a final decision being made by the coven mother.

If only your mother loved you, if only your Overseer wasn't her friend from the next town over. Maybe then you wouldn't be fighting off poison, voiding your bowels, and rapidly loosing liquid in the bottom of this sweltering canyon. Where is your pack? Sit down, rest a little, close your eyes and you'll feel better soon.

No place for a Hawk to Nest

Info

This story takes place decades ago, within living memory.

1-1

"We're going to need to brew more fuel to get home, Grandma."

For a moment I thought she hadn't heard me, but after drinking in the moonlight she said, "that won't be an issue, child."

The moon would be full tomorrow night, I couldn't help staring at it now. The cool wiɳd of the hills and forest breezing around my broom, through my dress, and across my skin. My grandmother, Mathilda Henhep'paza, and I were nearing the end of our journey. I was uncertain about how much fuel she had left in her flying wash basin, the wake of which made for easy follow on my broom. Just as the tree tops obeyed her terrible beauty, parting to make way for the her long elegant hair draped over a trellis of her branches, I too would follow her wisdom. If she thought there was enough to make it home, then it was true.

The lights of the town grew brighter. As we neared the edge of the forest the tree tops seemed to reach after us, for just a moment more of grandma's presence. The owls followed us for a time, coming closer to get a look at two witches flying by night.

Introducing our Narrator: Gretchen Whitehawk.

With long straight black hair held in double braids that stretched to the middle of her back, and thick lens glasses around her neck, she holds down a traditional witch hat, ringed with bead work and feathers. With immodest black dress adorned with green beaded tassels that ripple in the wind, she leans back upon her broom, her spectral lantern dangling underneath, fastened near the bristles. She carries only small bag, the scarce space of which she bloated with a book titled, "My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians."

We passed into the domain and I watched grandma signal our arrival as a mater of courtesy and custom. I smirked, amused. If the Steward wasn't anticipating us she was surely shocked the moment we arrived, the sudden presence of my grandmothers massive and powerful breɑth field would easily raise alarm of some horrible threat. Of course, she is rather identifiable too, the character of her breɑth is undeniably that of a grand tree mage.

We flew lower, hiding ourselves behind the hills and trees as we neared the lands of men. Gently gliding we came around to a crook between the hills above Little Portage, Minnesota. In a small clearing behind a mossy roofed cabin, we made our landing. I could feel the cold fogs of Lake Superior permeating through the trees, a mixture of the lake and forest on the wiɳd. I found it to be absolutely magical, if only for how familiar yet novel it was to our own home in the Black Hills.

I quickly dismounted and made myself available to grandmother, should she want any help from her basin. She subtly used the paddle to lift herself, never losing any dignity and only took my hand as a formality. We waited just a moment for the alchemical brew to drain off of her and back into the basin. The brew's qualities made it feel like ice cold water and yet it acted more like a jelly made of long strings, a little patience and your could leave dry.

Two of the local coven made their approach, and so grandma delicately stepped out to greet them. I felt their eyes land upon me and I looked back to return the witch's handshake, but they had forgotten about me.

They're faces were struck with awe at Mathilda's breαth, pulling like roots from the earth and stretching far above. How proud I was to be her granddaughter, especially as I watched her kindly return their gaze, but with no force or authority. Her pnuema was gentle and measured, she had no reason to boast. Even more evident in the difference of Grandmother and the Stewards transformations.

Mathilda was like a creature from a storybook, a forest nymph of yore, the way her bark grew across her skin was like gloves, her skin a flourishing green, and her branches held aloft her great flowing hair. Grandma's transformation, from many decades of watching over our territory in the Black Hills Forest, was controlled and uncompromising. The Steward was also a tree witch and great deal younger, I could already see she struggling to direct the growths on her body, she was trying too hard to keep them symmetric and shaped as ornaments, that was not the way trees. Grandma advised my mother many times, "you must give yourself fully to the forest, then the beauty of the woods will be your own."

"Thank you so much for having us, I'm Mathilda Henhep'paza, this is my granddaughter and assistant aspirant, Gretchen Whitehawk."

"Great Lady of the Black Hills Forest, it is an honor to have you. I am Steward Clair Spinel Spicedancer, this is my daughter Shirley Topaz Spicedancer. Please, come inside. If it's not to much trouble may I ask-" she began entertaining grandma as best she could. Clearly eager to gleam some precious insight from her elder, knowledge is power after all.

The other witch stayed behind as I took a brief moment to arrange our things and examine if the brew left in the basin would truly yield enough fuel to get us home. I refilled the reservoir in my broom's lantern. The Europeans had a rich history with flying magic. Multiple traditions most commonly produce the flying broomstick and basin. The basins were harder to make, and the fuel took time, but it was a small price for what was effectively a flying motorcycle. The classic broomstick was more akin to riding a mountain bike, I'd say more exhausting than that. The body is much better at using it's muscles than magic after all. The lantern assisted broom I rode was handy innovation that eased the burden.

Many of the Europeans enchanted tools doubles as tools of housework. I often wonder if the first flying broom was an accident, some old witch from long ago doing her chores and day dreaming of taking flight to somewhere far away, unconsciously enchanting the wood all the while. Despite the lofty library at my disposal, I never found a satisfactory explanation for the broom's origin. Regardless, it was the witches tradition to multitask housework and enchantment, women are good at that after all.

"I'm surprised," said Shirley Topaz, whose tone of voice immediately told me she wasn't waiting on me out of kindness. "For the Lady's granddaughter, you're a little old to not have your name yet."

I stood up, and a took a deep mental breath, careful not to show it physically. Years of verbal bouts with my sister's prepared me for this. "For the Lady's name a high standard must be met."

By the look on her face, I knew I landed a solid counter. I grabbed my bag and grandma's, shouldering them and giving an inquisitive look to my host. But the battle wasn't over.

"Oh I'm sure," she sneered. "It's such a novel name. Ours is so old, so rich in tradition."

"Yes is it," I said. "The Spicedancer's didn't take a name till well after, but the coven's predecessor was known during the revolution, for helping the British."

"You know your history."

"I intend to get a degree in it."

"And what about your coven's name, Henhep'paza? Native American, isn't it? what does it mean?"

I think I must have visibly cringed because there was a brightening in her face, she could smell that she drew blood. I told her the truth. "It's Lakota. It was my great grandmother that earned our name, branched from serving Evenfangs. It was supposed to mean night-tree, she wanted to reestablish our tribes traditions and

identity among the coven. But she didn't actually speak the language, it was robbed from our people after all, unfortunately the translation isn't quite right."

"Oh how sad, it's terrible when people don't know their history."

She beat me. A certain guilt of oversharing haunted me for the night, but I saw no point in avoiding the truth. The feeling was overpowered by my sense of relief, that Sherry Topaz Spicedancer turned out to be a measured woman. She, the witch, positioned herself firmly above me, the aspirant, and that was enough for her to put on a warm smile and welcome me into their home. She showed me plenty of hospitality as I settled into the guest room, bringing me some snacks and tea to help refuel after a long flight.

I settled in with my book. As always with the covens we'd been visiting, they were far more interested in bothering grandma than me, and I was just fine with that. I did worry she might want my help, but those fears were soothed when I saw her out the window, sitting near under the trees. Mathilda Henhep'paza did not need a guest room.

Much of the next day Grandma spent swarmed by the Spicedancer girls eager to hear her stories. When I set out on this grand retirement tour with grandma I really didn't expect how much of a celebrity she would be. During those decades bound to the Black Hills she must have written many letters. Alas this was the way many of my days were spent on this trip, uneventfully watching from the sidelines.

My attention was drawn to scenery of the field where they grew their crop, except it was no field. There were no roads to this small collection of cabins above Little Portage. All witches of the Grand Old Coven were secretive, civilians can't be trusted with knowledge of what lurks in the dark and haunts the wind. If anyone ever forced they're way into an alchemist's lab they'd find chemistry equipment. An Evenfang's home they likely find pelts and bones and hunting gear. My home? Trees, charms, and Lakota decorations out of history books. Many witches were strange but had plausible deniability; the Spicedancers had a graveyard in the woods.

"Serene, isn't it?" Shirley came up behind me, shaking me from my trance. She continued, "how's your espionage going?"

"I was just observing. I wouldn't dare."

"Why not, are our secrets not good enough for you?"

Shirley's breɑth began to swell, I saw growing waves of joy and ecstasy, maybe even a little funk. She began move, to groove, to undulate and flow in carnal ballet over the detritus covered forest floor. Then she swirled from trunk to trunk, gently stroking the gravestones in between the roots, all with impressive grace given the uneven terrain. She wove the ambient whispɛrs into her arms, cultivated for this purpose. Then the rotting leaves left from winter began to stir, and Shirley leapt to finish dance upon the great roots, the whole area bathed in her spell-laden breɑth. In just minutes this grove of death was teaming with worms, wiggling in time with their master.

"Oh that's better isn't it?" Shirley laughed turned her attention from the worms to me. "You're lucky. I was planning on waking this area up today. Want to join me?"

"I don't really dance," I said while watching.

She sat to rest atop a tombstone, still rhythmically swaying and letting the worms crawl between her toes. "Does is bother you? Does it gross you out? It's empowering. Come on, try."

I was a little intrigued, but I also wanted to change her focus. "What's you're connection with them? Surely they can't all be familiars?"

Shirley laughed, "of course not. I don't think a soul could handle this many pacts. They're just worms, they're easy to control once you know how. We breed them that way, and only keep the best ones." She wrapped one around her finger to examine it, "they're my pride and joy you know."

"I'm well aware, we use your worms in our gardens and for our pylon trees around the Black Hills."

She looked at me in a way I'm not sure how to describe, not quite condescending but like she was giving up on me. "You're so serious. I glad to hear our coven doesn't disappoint."

Then she flung the worm against the tree with great force, splattering it in half. The pieces of the wretched thing fell among the leaves and its entranced siblings. Shirley resumed her dance, and I stayed to watch so that I didn't seem rude.

1-2

That night set out for our destination, the details of which grandma had been very coy about. Grandma rode in he was basin, so experienced she barely needed the laundry paddle to steer. I followed on my broom, and we were lead by Shirley towards Isle Royal, where her older sister was Steward.

We road leisurely with the currents of the lake wiɳd, which wasn't really a choice. The whims of the lake could destroy you if you fought them, but follow the flow and the wiɳd would invigorate your breɑth and broom. It made for easy but slow travel. It took us over an hour to arrive. I remember musing that if I were not of the forests, I'd love to be a sea witch.

We touched down and Shirley introduced us to Hannah Spinel Spicedancer. Grandma never left her basin, and I soon understood why.

"Forgive me for being rude child, I may not look my age, but-"

Hannah interjected, "Oh Lady Henhep'paza, think nothing of it. Thank you visiting our coven on the mainland. And don't hesitate come back here if you need to."

Shirley turned to me, "it was nice meeting you Gretchen. I hope you find your journey enlightening."

It was clear they all knew something I didn't. Grandma beckoned me and I mounted my broom once more.

"I thought the island was our last stop," I yelled over the sound of Lake Superior's waves. Grandma just waved for me to follow, and after another half hour I felt a change wiɳd. Not unlike entering a domain, but it was no construction, just an area dominated by the pungent wiɳd of deep and dark and old forest. I felt awestruck and nostalgic all at once as the mists of the lake broke way and the full moon stepped out from the clouds, and the hidden island of ancient trees came into view.

The sound of the waves was replaced by the rustling of leaves and needles. I stepped onto the sand and took in the scenery of the looming giants in the dark.

"Do you still intend to leave your mother and sisters for college," grandma asked.

"I do. But I want to earn my name first grandma. I will return when I'm done." I said the conclusion I had come to after many months of squabbling with my mom. I had two older family sisters and four more coven sisters and brothers. My great grandmother and Mathilda had successfully cemented the name Henhep'paza over the Black Hills Forest, although we still had deep ties with the Evenfangs, such as Alicianna Evenfang, another of our sisters assistant and lead of animal management.

"Why are you set on this, child." Grandma spoke flatly, willing to hear my answer without prejudice, or maybe she was just absorbed with the forest wiɳd mingling with her breɑth.

"I won't lie, I do want study history for myself. This countries history, our people's history. I also think a general education could help me contribute to our more worldly affairs. I don't want to give up on being a witch, but everyone knows I'm not my sister." By which I referred to Giselle, the eldest who would certainly become the next domain holder after my mother. Geneva, our middle child, had focused in on alchemy and provided us with all manner of material magics. Everyone had something to contribute, something that made them special, but me.

"We could start a business, public or secret, or I could handle the paper work, or something. We don't have anyone to handle the outside world or the government. I could do that. And I don't just have to get my bachelor's, I could find a bachelor too." With that corny joke I suddenly snapped into self awareness and found that my explanation had slipped into pleading.

Grandma was looking at me now, her vision was intense, like she was stripping me bare. "A husband would be good. A coven needs people, and babies don't grow on trees. You have to be careful with men, dear. They are so very disappointing." She began walking up the breach to the timberline, her green skin and immaculate hair and powerful tree-like breαth all otherworldly beautiful in the moonlight.

She turned to me and said, "Earn your name, and you have my blessing to be the witch you choose to be. You've always been a good girl, Gretchen, I know you would never betray and abandon your sisters."

Something deep within me was agitated, uncertain. Was I realizing my hopes were not reasonable as I thought, or now that grandma would let me was I afraid to get it? Really there was something else I was wrestling with, but I didn't know it at the time. All I knew was now was the end of grandma's big tour and my proving was here. It was time to stop being a mere aspirant and to become a witch.

Mathilda grew ever more serious, "Gretchen, you have until the New Moon to find me at my new home, my resting place, and my last vigil. Spend you're time hear wisely, I believe you will enjoy it, and then I will name you in darkness. As a Witch you may take my basin home." Then she smiled, "think of it as a graduation present."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing and my face must have said as much, because Mathilda held up a hand to cut me off.

"Can you feel it, Gretchen? Can you feel the song of these woods? I've heard it for decades, calling me home. You'll find your answers inside. If you fail or quit I forbid you take my basin. You mother is aware of the arrangement. Do not fail, meet me within."

Grandma stepped backward and the very trees began to part around her. "I love your dear, but I'm old and it's time. I have such sights to see."

I didn't give chase, I wouldn't disrespect her like that, but as I watched the branches close around her, I wanted too.

What was I to do? I had looked forward to this moment the entire trip, I even got exactly what I wanted, grandmother's blessing to pursue my degree, as long as became a witch of course. With that my mother would finally end her ceaseless prodding. However, I had no idea grandma would be leaving us, had she said goodbye to my sisters? Could we visit? Mathilda was nearly a hundred years old, and sure her bones were as strong as the trees she'd spent decades drawing power from, but to stay on some uncharted island alone, I could hardly bare the thought. Suddenly an image came into my head of watching a small babe, maybe my own, learn from their great grandmother, just as I did as a child. I didn't know I wanted something like that, you really don't know what you have till it's gone.

"Enough," I told myself. I had many thoughts, but there was one supreme strategy: fly the ring to Mordor. I refilled the reservoir of my broom's lantern and took off into the night. I would scout the circumference of the island while sorting out my thoughts. It really can't be overstated just how useful a personal flying device is, especially one that is silent, small, and can even be powered manually as tiring as that is. I could easily find any paths on the shore, failing that I could fly overhead. There must be something here, more than just old trees. Maybe a house, maybe another tree witch like grandma.

What began to worry me was the deadline, the new moon was two weeks away, a magnitude more time than I should need. If she gave me that much time, then this would be harder than it seemed, it was supposed to be my proving after all. The was a little bit of motto in the Grand Old Coven, that we are all equally deserving

of respect. This a total lie of course, prestige was everything, grandma proved it. But, there was one hard line, that between witch and aspirant, between someone who could be assigned the critical and sometimes dangerous work of a witch and someone who could not.

My gut feeling turned out to be right, my trip yielded nothing. The wiɳd of this place was strong, almost like ancient stone walls, and my pnuema couldn't reveal anything of use from shore. There was one notable spot where the water went inward to a little cove of trees, but when I investigated I could tell by a cluster of whispɛrs that it didn't go far, and ended at some mound or rock that I couldn't make out in the dark. Around the whole island, pausing now and then to let a wafting patch of fog to pass by, I soon made it back to where I started.

I took a short break and then a running leap to begin my ascent. The alchemical lantern provides energy assistance for the output of my broom, it was no where near powerful enough to carry me, not like the flying basin could. I channeled my breɑth in to my broom and climbing ever higher. I sat with both legs to one side to be and comfortable and possible as I focused. I kept my incline at an angle I could bare, getting tired in the air was a death sentence after all. Once I found a up draft where the lake wind broke upward against the trees I spiraled around it until I could almost see the whole island. As I reach my zenith I no longer strained to push upward and gently drifted ever so slightly downward as I went. My body felt a great relief, and my heart soared as the wiɳd swirled about and replenished my breɑth, all under under the silent brilliance of the full moon.

Once my heart rate was manageable I looked down, and found that the island was a black unknown. It was dense with trees and thickets, and anywhere else the moonlight might reveal the ground was blanketed in a fog that I now realized was emanating from the island itself. I followed to it's source, the center where the impenetrable wall of trees finally gave way and only a thick bubbling cauldron of fog remained. I stared down into the depths and intensified my pnuema. Something about this fog wasn't right. Sure, the wiɳd of this place was special and saturated, but it was a forest! Surely I of all people could make something of what I was seeing, some irregularity in the wiɳd. Much to the horror of the most primal parts of my brain, I caught glimpses in the dark of eyes staring back at me. Not the eyes of mere animals, no this was the sensation of another person, a mage or witch. I saw them all around me, here and there in every direction of the island. They were not moving, just watching me. Again I look below to the center of the island as a great gust of wind came down from above to part the fog, and I saw something else, only a partial glimpse of something much bigger, something on the wiɳd dancing among the trees.

I returned to the beach and set down my broom next to grandma's basin. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous. What both comforted and concerned me was that grandma was inside, and soon I would be too. I set down my broom and began to weave a spell.

1-3

Even using my breɑth to insulate myself there wasn't much I could do to prevent the humidity of the cold lake wind from chilling my skin all through my breezy dress. I needed to get into the woods, where the wiɳd would be more familiar to me. The trees were like a wall, all their branches, leaves, and needles thickly interwoven. Their sides couldn't possibly get enough sunlight to be healthy, but this was clearly no normal forest. Grandma had me bring nearly nothing with us on this trip, I had know tools to physically braves the woods, this was my proving as a witch after all, and a Henhep'paza at that. Sunlight was the key, as slow as it may be plants move to follow the sun.

The trees were rife with every whispɛrs I could possibly need, I walked about for a while considering my options. My hat, as many witch hats are, was an enchanted whispɛrs trap. Gradually the little lights stuck

around the underside of the hat and hair. I forget the full composition, but it was only two of my own wδrds and the rest wild whispɛrs stitched together. I cast Melodize: Triplet Sunlight Vines. The melδdy grew outward from my hand and into three oscillating lights and looked like little partial birds when dimmed. They were strung together by their tail vines, and I moved them into a triangular orbit around me that flapped their shine-vines gently outward.

I walked into the wall of branches, moving my arms along and willing my melδdy. Pushing into the branches, the vines would awaken them then I would draw them upward and around me as I walked, the three lights orbiting over my head and under my knee. In this way I slowly walked through the wall of branches, careful not to trip because if I lost control my wild craft spell would surely break. I made my way through the wall, roughly tree tree tightly group and thick with branches. The darkness enveloped me and as the trees blocked my path I was cautious to not get turned around. Truth be told my sense of direction isn't the strongest. Suddenly the hair of my neck stood on end as I realized I was watched. I found the eyes and they return my gaze in a witch's handshake. I followed them out onto a path in between another wall of trees. The branches closed behind me, the last rays of moonlight being closed off. The thick canopy and wafting clouds of fog created an otherworldly darkness.

I quickly looked back and drew my spell into a ring around my waist using one hand to maintain it. "Hello?" I heard some movement, not quite the sound of a twig snapping, but certainly wood. I stepped closer as the eye's seemed to beckon me. I heard wood creak once more as a raspy voice replied, "hello."

In the darkness I could tell the path that stretched in either direction, I walked across to the next tree, behind which this person seemed to be hiding. I reached to move a branch aside and get closer, the sense of welcome emanating from her breαth, when suddenly the branch wrapped around my fingers, and shook my hand very slightly up and down. It took me a moment to make sense of their posture, and where their breαth and limbs ended and the tree's began. But there was no distinction, because this witch was entirely fused to the tree. "Hello," she said again, the corners of her lips created cracks in the bark of her skin.

My voiced swelled with an astonishment and something else that I didn't understand at the time. It was pity, but what was there to pity?

Looking her up and down I said, "hello, oh my gosh. Are you witch?"

"Yes."

I rattled off a hundred questions as you might imagine, but when I stopped I could see that her eyes were weary. She yawned, and whole of the trunk groaned and the leaves shuttered. She said, "seek eldest," and closed her eyes. I gently pulled my hand away, realizing that she had pointed one twig-finger down the path to my left. I wanted to see and study her in the day light, but obviously this was not the time.

I widened my spell as I went and intensified my vision to study each tree as I followed the path slong the ring, I found person after person melded into nearly each trunk, with the exception of newer saplings that seemed to be sprouting in between. The inner ring was also like a wall, one which I was now far more hesitant to pass through. Unfortunately the nature of my spell was awakening and pulling the branches around me. I caught someone's arm and she groaned in her sleep. I apologized and scurried along in embarrassment until the path ended with a great boulder.

The boulder had a great crack in it's side, where a curious tree branch was wedged. The branch was almost exactly the shape of human arm bones. I followed it to the trunk, but I could not find any sign of a person bonded to it, yet I could see that the breαth of the tree was the same as the others.

A voice spoke in a language I did not recognize, something old, possibly native to the Americas. I looked all around as it switched to what I think was French, it had those flowing S sounds and nasal moaning, I couldn't understand a word. Then finally I found a single eyeball staring at me from a knot in the tree. A

woman's voice said in clear human tone, and thankfully in English, "you're not the new comer everyone's dreaming about."

I place a hand on tree to look closer, to both our horror my finger slipped into her lips.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I-".

She switched back to French, I assume to curse me out. In the middle of my flurry of apologies she spoke, "enough! I will see to you in the morning." Her voice pulsed through the wiɳd and even destabilized my own breɑth.

Needless to say, I obeyed. I let my spell destabilized and scattered back into the wiɳd as I moved to the outer side of the path and cozied up underneath the branches of a pine trees. I drew upon my Nurture, taking deep breaths and brought the wiɳd of the forest into my lungs and imbibed on all the tree essence I could. I'd done this a couple times back home, but this island chill would put my ability to the test. Gradually I made my circɻlation more like that of the stalwart giants that surrounded me. I would say that I became one with the trees but that idea now had a less metaphorical meaning to me.

In the morning I was stiff, freezing, and probably half dead. I was lost in a dream of my childhood, being so frustrated with the other children at school. They said I was weird, that my family was weird. I wanted to explain myself, but the words wouldn't come out, weren't allowed to come out. Even if I could, they were all busy having fun, darting around and hiding behind trees. That part was wrong, the elementary school had a great open field. My eyelids wouldn't open as I faded back into reality. *Quick!* I thought, and focused to expunge the tree circɻlation from my body and reinvigorate my warm blood.

After a half hour I finally stood up and stretched with wooden movements. Sunbeams caught my eyes here and there as I revived myself. All around from the top of the canopy to below the branches were filled with mirrors and prisms sharing light from above. The forest was filled with colorful beams that excited the processes of some enchanted lanterns I missed the day before, that hung in between the two rings of trees and spread a soft glow unto the forest floor.

"You are the newcomer's granddaughter," said the eldest. Finally I could see her, she was a massive oak that split in two about five feet off the ground. Through the split I could see a sort of game trail tunnel under a dense thicket. Her face, mainly her eyes and mouth were spread out askew along the trunk closer to the path. I couldn't identify her nose among the weathered bark.

"Yes, how-"

"We can speak through our roots. The whole forest knows you're here." Her tone of voice left me feeling as though I were unwelcome.

I asked, "are your the eldest then? The first?"

"No, she was." The eldest indicated behind me.

I examined the tree across from her, the very one I had sheltered with. There was no trace of a person, physically or in the tree's breɑth. There was, however, a small trinket held in the nook of a branch, encased in amber. While it was preserved it wasn't the best presentation method, from what I could tell it seemed to evoke both Inuit and Viking motifs.

Interested as I was, we were still in conversation. I turned back, "I have a lot of questions about this place, and of course I need to go deeper and find my grandmother. Will you help me?"

"No, I will test you. Through me is your only path," said the eldest. Then I watch as branches all along the inner ring began to move and interlock. It was very fast by wood standards. I was starting to get nervous. Obviously grandma new things would be a hassle. Whatever purpose this place served, of course they wouldn't allow an outsider to stride through freely.

"Alright, what's the test?"

"You will answer three questions. First, what is your name?"

"Gretchen- Whitehawk," I said bewildered.

"What is your favorite kind of tree?"

"Black Hills Spruce. It's like home."

"Very good, and which is your favorite tree on this island?"

There it was, the catch. It seemed the eldest was more jovial that she let on, that was part of the joke really, but I knew very well this was a test. She said tree, but she meant witch, and I know how witches are. I'd need to answer tactfully.

"You may take you're time coming up with an answer. Do be back by sunset," the eldest finished and I saw her as well as all the branches down the path of the ring begin to relax.

If I couldn't take hints, I'd never make it as a witch. I began to walk the path away from the eldest and the boulder, examining the outer ring of trees as I went. Many of them had trinkets or carvings in their trunks, all seemed very old and none of the outer ring showed any sign of human body parts. As the morning went on I was thankful to find fruit, which I could not refuse but did hesitate before picking. When I heard the sound the of water coming through louder than before I rushed to refill my supply.

I found a spot where the outer ring was nearly open and crossed onto a bit of shaded beach. After two steps I was struck with fear, the fear that comes from shape in the periphery of your vision. I turned and locked eyes with tall figure and screamed. He also screamed, and slipped backwards onto his butt, but the rocking of his fishing boat was too much and he slipped, falling onto his back with a loud and wet plop at the edge of the beach. His fishing rod clattered about, knocking over an empty beer can.

"Don't scare me like that," I said at a passive aggressive volume.

He eyed me climbing back to his feet to stop his boat from drifting. He took big breath and let out a sigh. "Well that was funny," he said dryly. He got back in his boat and began reeling in his line. He said innocently, "you know it's illegal to be on this island, right?"

It didn't surprise me. "And what about you?"

"I am not on the island, I am on a boat. Just thought I'd let you know." He cast his line again and settled into his seat. He looked back at me, watching as I collected myself and went out to the water. "I've never seen anyone dressed like that. What are you doing out here of all places?"

"I'm camping."

"That's nuts." He said it just such that I could take it as an insult.

"Why's it illegal to come here?"

"Some kind of endangered species, a bird or something."

I filled my canteen began back inside. "Have a good day."

"Are you going to be okay, by yourself" he said.

"Who says I'm alone?"

I climbed back through to walk back the way I came, this time studying the inner ring. The trees were younger, and now the visible signs of witches bonded to them were much more evident. I noticed that the majority face towards the center of the island. IT seemed For every nine facing inward one face outward, towards my path. The walls of trees were so overcrowded that if this was not a magical forest I would certainly think it was a dying.

I came to the aspen witch I first met last night. She smiled at me and I introduced myself. Her replies were slow and she mostly talked in a hushed voice, because when she became to lively the wood of her lips creaked and split, and no amount of the meager chap-stick I brought with me would help that.

I asked her many questions, her name was once Anne Taylor, a witch of the New England colony that fled persecution. This happened long before the Witch of Ice signed the Treaty of Salem, and by the time Anne

had learned of the arrangement she had already become part of the wilds and could not show herself in public. She continued to imbibe the bounties of the forest till one day she began to hear the calling through the trees. She began her journey and eventually made it hear to this Island of Dryads. She served as a caretaker among those that came before, until one day she too became part of the second wall.

She said that oldest of the dryads had faded since she'd joined, but many more had come, in no small part due to the proliferation of the Grand Old Coven I'm sure.

I gave her my thanks and she returned to her rest, or maybe her work. Following the path back, I studied the many variations of the dryad's transformation. No two were just the same, but all seemed to give up their legs first. I realized this when I found the outline of a slender leg along the sprawling base of a cypress, all made of bark and wood of course, but the foot disappeared into an overgrown root.

Finally I reached the boulder, and the eldest greeted me, "have you found you're answer?"

"Yes, I have. My favorite tree in this forest is the first one I met, Anne Taylor down the way. After all, she's the one the pointed me to you." I finished with a warm sincerity in my voice, and judging by the coo of the eldest my answer just right. My grandmother, regardless of if she counted, would have been a boring choice. Choosing the eldest directly would have been manipulative flattery. My answer gave the eldest her compliment and enough distance to enjoy it.

"Very well," she said as the branches between her two trunks bent outward. "You may pass. Hurry now, and watch your step."

I'm sure the dryads didn't need me crawling around and climbing through them to traverse the ring, so with a little excitement I climbed up the eldest, very careful to avoid touching her eye, and came down the over side into the thicket tunnel. My steps squelched in the mud bellow, this was actually something more like a canal than a trail, there was just enough water to wet my ankles. I walked bent over, at times using my hands on either side of the tunnel, until the daylight shown through once more and I could easily step through the grass into the second ring.

1-4

I came into the light to the sounds of laughter. "Hello child, we were all getting acquainted." Mathilda stood in the path with every nearby dryad looking her way.

While this ring path bordered yet a third wall of trees, it was far more lively that the first. Many bright smiling faces and the occasional arm for gesturing decorated the trunks of the trees, whose shapes seemed twisted until my eyes could discern where the curvature of a human body ended and the tree began. I drew near and listen the dryads talk, but I could not fully understand. At times they asked simple small talk questions of grandma, but then the conversation would drift into jargon, or chanting, or singing seamlessly. I was baffled, but I could see the grandma was not, she was listening with her body. The whole forest was saturated in the mixing breαth of so many dryads, all deeply resonant with one another. At times a drifting patch of thick fog would drift from overhead to around my feet. The whispɛrs were incredibly populous and well organized the in leaves, and not a single higher order soμnd was anywhere to be found. It was truly a wondrous forest of witchcraft.

Suddenly my name was called, I felt a little embarrassed getting lost in the enchantment of it all. I found myself the center of attention.

"Gretchen," Mathilda said, "why do you want to be a Witch?" She was being quite serious and my mouth hung open waiting for some hint of what she wanted. She said, "I'll be waiting for your answer." And just like that grandma left me again, strolling through the next wall, deeper into the island, and leaving me alone with strangers.

"How shall we test her? Wynona, any ideas?"

"Just one," said a woman who leaned over and look me directly in the eye. Her entire torso was part of a great branch with her hips fusing into the trunk and her arms bound into the branches above. She commanded me, "follow the path and undo what the demon beaver was wrought."

Her face was framed with bark, her greenish and wooden fibrous skin stretched reluctantly, but most of all it was her glassy resin coated eyes with small drops pooling at the corners that inspired of kind of fear or respect in me. I said, "yes ma'am," and sped down the path.

I think I walked for nearly an hour thorough the long curving path. The dryads closed their eyes and as I came and watched me as I went. Soon I came to a large blockade of fallen branches and sticks, apparently a beaver damn. I could see that from underneath ran a canal to the inner ring. I easily pulled out a few sticks and let out a tickling a water. I waited to see if some furry nightmare was going to emerge, but I only saw a small root in the mud wave at me, then point outward. Not wanting to disturb anyone, I chose to climb over the damn rather then force my way through trees. The footing was tricky, with my shins scrapped and dress caught by odd sticks, but is was dry and very secure. As I crested the top and looked upon the murky inlet, a sudden roar nearly stopped my heart.

"Hey! It's you again!"

Hidden under some branches was the fisherman and his boat.

I took a moment to collect myself and climbed down. As I knelt down to dislodge a large clump from the entrance to the dam, I had half a mind to ignore him entirely.

"What are you up to," he asked in a sort of awkward way.

"Looking for a beaver," I said, annoyed.

"Ain't we all," he smirked.

"What?"

"I was just checking my crab traps," he said, waving around a crab in his hand as he talked. "I always set up a few when I come out here. Helping out the problem if I can, you know?"

I tossed my arm full of grass and sticks and sludge aside and said curiously, "no, I don't. What problem?"

He smiled as he talked, excited to lecture me, "the invasive species issue. See, this little crayfish is native." He pulled a squirming miniature lobster from his trap a let it go into the water. Then he pulled out a crab that looked a sickly green. "This crab is from the Atlantic, they've spread like crazy through the great lakes over the last fifty years, now they're getting out this way too. What's worse is, see this egg sack? It's not an egg sack, it's parasite, a type of barnacle that hijacks their reproductive bits. Ruins their life and it ruins the taste, so they're not even good for eating. It's a problem for everybody. No idea how these guys keep spreading with the parasite running rampant, but they are."

I had taken few steps closer to look. The fisherman let his specimen go into the pile of squirming legs and claws, all of them reaching upward to the to grab the rim. I was grossed out. Spiders and bugs I can handle, they're ever present in the woods after all. But water critters have always disturbed me. As he went back to digging in his trap, I asked, "you're not worried about them getting out?"

"What?" No. Crabs pull each other down, they can't climb out."

"Really?"

"Sure, you've heard of crab mentality, right? 'If I can't have then no one can,' kind of people? Thing is with people it's, well I don't know what it is, but with these crabs I think it's something worse."

"How so?"

"Well," The fisherman sat back the last crab of his trap, "I take that back, it just a different kind of bad. It's blindness and fear. Each crab screws over the other on accident. The crabs don't understand the bucket, and they don't understand each other, that each other crab is also scared acting stupid. Each crab just reaches for

whatever is in front of them and pulls." They might all be crabs, but they don't work together, not really. They only understand is who's got the bigger claw, you know?"

The fisherman pulled on a knife and stabbed the crab and parasite, ceasing it's movement, then he tossed it out towards the lake. Sickened, I began began to climb back over of the damn.

He called out behind be, "are you gonna be all right?"

I didn't answer. I turned back for just a moment and saw as a spell, a simple groωls that one the many dryads nearby must have made. It washed over him and drew his attention back to his own business. It should be not surprising that an island fortified with walls of witches had ways of keeping people out.

Back in the inner ring and out of sight, a dryad told me about the clog that led to the canal of the second ring, so I had to crawl on my belly along the side of the damn and unclog that to. When I was done my dress was muddy, but the canals were flowing. I heard the fisherman start his boat and drive off as I started back.

I returned to Wynona and the others, once again I had been given a sort of non-test. I had no doubt the dryads could have handled it themselves. "I'm back."

Wynona addressed me casually, "thank you, child. The path is just that way, you'll see it." Then she went back to chatting with the others while they performed some work as a group. I can only really describe it as spell-crocheting, where one would twiddle and spin a thread of æther out of the errant wisps of fog and then pass it to the next who began weaving it into a larger chain and then passed it along and so on down the line. I was dreadfully curious as to what it was, but Wynona's tone and the group's indifference towards me said that looking for the path was more of a command than help.

I walked until I found a canal cutting through the path, now filled with water and many ambulatory roots wiggling about the edges. I stepped in lifting up my dress to keep it dry. Hunched over I made my way into the canal tunnel of the third ring. My feet stuck and slid and sclurpped in the mud as I crawled with one hand. I found myself rather dizzy, the elements finally getting to me. I found the exit with no idea how far I had gone, but my lower back felt it was plenty.

I sat down on a nearby rock and examined the inner ring. This was the center of the island, the last ring, although I could see across the way a forth ring starting to form. At the center of the circle was massive cloud of fog, and stirring within it was the most wondrous thing I'd seen yet. I knew at once it was the greatest peice of spell craft I'd every seen, and nothing has topped it since. It was a soŋg, the pinnacle form of soμnd and spells, but that description failed to do it justice. It took the form of a woman, bloated from a massive reserve of fuel stored with in it. The torso gave way to what seem like another larger one, which sat upon another, it was pyramid all dressed in a gown of myriad styles, sewn from a complex network of other smaller spells, which I now surmised was being maintained by the dryads. What this spell system was for I didn't know yet, but it was massively complex. It seemed that it should collapse under its own weight and intricacy, how incredible the teamwork of the dryads must be! I could hardly discern what function it all served. The soŋg danced gently back and forth, and sang in silence as the fog spilled from it's mouth.

But, as amazing as it was, what sat below it on the ground gave me pause. All around the center of the clearing, where the gargantuan soŋg made its stage, was a wall of roots and wood. It was heavily reinforced and angled inwardly down. It had grown around a pit, a large one. I kept my distance from the unnerving center wall and found grandma next to a sapping with members of the fledgling forth ring.

Mathilda spoke as I approached, "can you hear it, child? I heard it long ago and have longed to be hear ever since."

I could not hear it. I heard the breeze in the trees and the trickling in the small canal. I heard the movement of branches and slight cracking of wood from the dryads all through out the forest. I heard the light

swishing of the soŋg in the fog, but nothing else. It was something that only the trees could hear, and apparently from thousands of miles away.

"Why do you want to be a witch, child?"

There was that tone of voice again, it seemed inviting enogh but I feared what a wrong answer would bring. "To support mom and my sisters and you."

"And what happens when we're gone? Who are you then? Go and see the reason we are here."

She directed me towards the hole. I hesitated for just a moment, the dryads near her watched quietly. These were clearly the newest of the island, they looked a lot like grandmother, if less beautiful. Each woman was a fully transformed witch, some sitting and some clinging to their tree with bark, root, and branch slowly growing around, into, and with them. I looked away from their eyes, all though I was just as afraid of what I'd see in the pit.

I went closer, cautiously watching the soŋg overhead, but it did not react to me. I had secured my grip on the wall of tangled roots and lifted myself just enough to peak over the edge. As I took in the imprisoned horror my fear turned to fascination. The hole was nearly a cylinder about ten or fifteen feet across that extended deep into the earth, vertigo inducing deep. The shaft was clean cut, the walls slicked in some way I couldn't understand. That was except for the roots and branches protruding downward, forming a trap near the surface, a trap to keep something in. I heard the soŋg above cry out through my breɑth, and as I looked upward into its dress I saw cloud of seething fog and bulbous misshapen fruits. One of them trembled and fell, and for a split second I saw the thing open into a sort of ear. I watched its fall illuminate the dark of the pit revealing dead chitinous serpents wound and slumped and decayed against the walls.

The fruit then witnessed and splattered the prisoner of the pit. A reaction in the wiŋd rippled upward revealing something my witch eyes had failed to detect, another massive soŋg. The æther of it's composition lit up with the wave, taking the form of a serpent that braced itself in a spiral, and is terrible circular maw was right near the top, much to close to me. I fell backwards in a panic, and the dyrad's soŋg began to twirl the long laces of its dress all around the area. The gnarled wall around the pit grew rapidly and shifted inward. When the event calmed, I looked back to grandma for assurance, she waited on me as if their were nothing wrong. I peaked over the edge once more to find a fresh tangle of roots emanating a countering breɑth into the pit, and the visibly fading prisoner gnawing on the roots.

"Grandma, you don't have to do this."

"I don't? And who are you to say that, child? Look at the work being done here. Look at what we witches do everyday to keep the world sane. I have dedicated my life to my craft, and here is my reward, a station among these, the most accomplished of our kind."

I was frantic. Mathilda was right about the prisoner of course, I don't know how it came to be, but such an incredible soŋg shouldn't be able to persist, not trapped like it is. It must be exceedingly dangerous. In comparison the dryad's soŋg had to be maintained by an entire island of elder witches. But that didn't matter to me. I attacked, "who is our kind? What about mom? What about our coven? What great grandma and the band?"

"Yes, what about them? How are we supposed to live in a world threatened by such evil. To make progress, to have true freedom we must destroy this threat." Mathilda Henhep'pazz stood. We were the same height yet she towered over me. "You've said it yourself, child. You have no talent like your sisters. Have I not made this test easy enough for you? How are you going to take care of yourself with your books?"

I was heart broken hearing her words, I was hurt, I was angry. Something flashed through my mind in that moment, a possibility on making her eat those words. Everyone was born with a magical Nature, I had trained to gain a Nurture of the forest in addition, and my Mathilda? She was obviously far beyond that, I think she was more Nurture than Nature now. What if I cast a spell like the one I had before to pass through the trees? Could I bend grandmother to my will, could I drag her back home so that everyone else could talk sense into

her? No, I couldn't. I could never do something so violating to someone I loved. My face was scrunched, my fists balled, and my teeth clenched to a bleeding frustration. Not to mention, I was weak and she was far my superior. She would know if I tried something like that.

So I ran.

I fled the center chamber back to the third wing, the feeling of a dreadful pressure building in my skull as I frantically crawled through the canal. I slipped and got myself covered in mud, I recovered and kept on, all the while being surrounded and watched. I rushed past Wynona and all the other dryads of the second ring, only searching for where I had come it. Surrounded by trees and eyes and stray human shapes on a long curving corridor was disorienting to say the least.

I was suddenly struck by a groωls, maybe, because I was hardly paying attention. The moment dampened my panic, a sort of fearful sadness washed through my body as I found the canal to the second ring. I pressed on, wanting to break down and cry more and more. Again I was suddenly struck, this time with pain in my foot. I screamed realizing that a crab had pinched me. I kick it away and continued, thoroughly disgusted about every step. Finally I reached the eldest's trunk and climb up, but when I reached the top with my foot between her split, she squoze and pinched my foot. I panicked and fell forward into the first ring. She called after me, but I couldn't spare the energy to listen as I scrambled to find a spot to exit.

But before I could I tripped over a mδan that dispersed across my breαth, and I just began to crawl on my belly under the trees. Guilt washed over me, thinking about leaving grandma behind, about facing my mother as a failure, about not living up to my sisters, and through it all I forsook any care for my dress as the dead undergrowth scratched and snagged. I ripped myself free and ran in a torn dress onto the beach. As my eyes focused I collapsed in despair when I realized my broom and grandma's basin were gone, and I completely broke down into a wretched ugly sobbing mess.

I'm not sure how long that lasted, just enough for some of the fight to drain from me. Then a voice reached my ears, Shirley Topaz Spicedancer stood over me in the waning dusk. "Gretchen, I asked you if you're okay."

I couldn't show myself like this, so I ran back towards the timberline, trapped with no where to go, still a mess. The trees opened up before me, and Shirley stood behind watching me with her face shadowed by the setting sun. I took two steps into the timberline and watched as strangely all the whispɛrs seemed to pull away. For a final time I was struck by a soμnd, this was was more complex, maybe a melδdy, shaped almost like a hawk. I only caught a glimpse of it as it's talons tangled into my hair and melted across my breαth into something like a network of roots. I quickly tried to counteract it, pumping random noise into my breαth for dilution, but I was so unfocused that I took an absence of activity to mean that it was gone.

Shirley was gone and slowly the trees quenched the twilight from my view, and I weakly pulled myself up to follow the path forward through the ring of trees.

Anne Taylor stopped me, "I'm concerned about you. We have paved the way for you. This attitude seems ungrateful. Make up with your grandmother."

The were some echoing sentiments from the others nearby as I walked through with branches closing in around me. Then I found myself surrounded Wynona and the others, moving their branch hands to cloying effect as they spoke to me. "It's a little hurtful that you don't appreciate us dear, but we understand. You've lived half you life with your grandmother and the other half in the outside world, you've internalized these expectations from the world of men. It's not your fault."

Dread welled up in my stomach as I hobbled onward through to the inner ring. My dress torn and wet, legs muddy, my braids falling apart, my glasses scratched, and my hat, I had no idea where I lost it. I've always been like this, too weak to be useful, my head in the clouds and my nose in books. I've lived off what was given to me and I'm too pathetic to pay it back. The pressure in my throat mounted, my stomach burned, my muscles

ached and all of it lifted from me the moment that Mathilda approached and said, "Gretchen, I didn't bring you on this trip just for your test. I brought you because I wanted you hear."

"You are a perfectly capable witch, but you always put yourself down. Your sisters have filled the roles our coven needed, but I have another for you. I want you to stay here as the new caretaker. You've always loved history haven't you? Then why not write down all the stories of the witches here?"

I didn't know what to say, I just collapsed to my knees. Grandma couldn't quiet bend over to hold me, but Shirley arrived by broom. She placed my hat next to me and spoke to grandma as I was loosing consciousness.

"Did she agree," asked Shirley.

"Not yet. She's reached her limit."

"She's probably hungry, not enough protein. Here, Gretchen, swallow this."

I don't know what it was that Shirley fed me, but I swallowed it whole easily. Almost as if it crawled down my throat on it's own.

I became the caretaker of the Island of Dryads at age nineteen, grandma named me Gretchen Henhep'paza. As Mathilda settled into her place so did I in mine. I rode in the basin back to Isle Royal often, with the Spicedancers relaying me supplies. There was a spot in one corner of the island that extended from the original outer ring, it was the closest thing I could have to privacy and so I kept my tent there. I spent the next ten years caring for the trees, recording the stories of the dryads, and studying the prisoner of the island. My life was consumed by my work as a witch, I had little time or opportunity for anything else. I exchanged letters with my sister's back home, I read the occasional book. I even got a cat, it never got along with Shirley but the dryads welcomed a new friend skulking through the underbrush. If there was any reprieve from the island, it was the fisherman.

2-1

His name was John Huth, and in his little fishing boat he certainly should not have been braving Lake Superior. He said there were always rumors about this place on the mainland, and once when he was a teenager he and his friends took his father's boat out here to stay the night. Apparently they made it through the trees and saw an ghost of woman. They camped on the beach and got no sleep. I told him I'd had no such luck. He said he only came out here two or three times a year, as his own secret spot on the lake, however I'd see him nearly once a month, except for in winter. I wonder what he thought of me, some strange woman living alone where no one should be.

"Gretchen, whenever I ask about what you're doing here you give me this look," said John one evening of the summer of my first year on the island. "I know you don't want me poking into your business, but do you have a raft or kayak or something stashed here?"

I think I must have giving him the exact avoidant look he mention because he continued. "I just want to know you safe, that you can get off this island in an emergency."

"As I've told you, I have everything under control."

"Are you sure? You know that even this boat is too small for this lake, right?" If I got hit with a ten footer you would never see me again."

"And you still come out here?"

"I never said I was smart."

"Well, I am."

He was silent for a while, and before we parted ways he said, "it's good that you can stand on your own. Be safe."

I returned to the path and began towards camp eager cook my catch, when a nearby dryad, one of the few on the second ring that faced out stopped me.

She said, "You be careful child. I remember when witches are treated as monsters, less than human. Only when they realized they needed us were we allowed us to live, but only in shadows and secrets. They hate us for our power. We work and work, we go to great pains to mend the wiɳd. We do it because we're the only ones who can. Them, the normal people that walk around blissfully unaware of the whispɛrs on the wiɳd, protected by luck and the privileged of inclusion, they rely on us even unaware, and they expect our sacrifice. If that man knew who you really are, he would not treat you the same. I wouldn't let him off his boat, he thinks you're alone."

"Yes. I understand. Thank you, Ms. Franklin."

With a small bow I bid her good night and continued back while taking her words to heart. She had made her home on the outskirts of Pennsylvania. She was cunning woman of local renown in the colony, and held sway over the woods there. In the cold winter of the revolution she offered the soldiers assistance. One of them flattered her with honeyed words. She welcomed him into her bed and gave him all she could spare, more than she'd intended so that he might return. He never did. But decades later when the men came to chop down her trees and build their homesteads, they did so well aware of her secrets.

Whenever John visited I asked someone to keep an eye on me. I did spend a fair amount of time fishing with him, and over the years of observing the beach in high tide and low I came to understand more about the island. There were walls of tangled roots, retaining the landmass around the entire circumference. In time this peaked my curiosity, after all, the dryads had not always been here. In the late winter when the water was at it's lowest and the tide went out and the day was sunny, I dove into the lake. It was the most utterly intolerable deathly cold I could have imagined, but I found what I need to see. Below the wall of roots, in spaces between rocks and mud and sand, I saw two large chitin-like walls that curved and strange angles and crisscrossed together. Was it stone or biological? I don’t know, I was only I the water for a moment and the dark depths filled be with a terrible sense of dread. I never went down there again.

2-2

I often found myself spending time with the dryads of the third ring, who, aside form the few neighbors Mathilda had in the fledgling fourth, they were still the most active and human. Not that they weren't still human, or people, of course, it just that the elder dryads of the second ring were so much more integrated into the forest. I found it easier to talk to those more my contemporary. One, Witch Alexandra Gorn, was tucked away inside the ring. I met her while doing a little cleaning of the underbrush. Crawling between the tree trunks I suddenly looked at the great root of pine and got that instinctual uncanny recognition of a face. It was when she laughed that I realized she was upside down. I haven't yet fully discerned the pattern of how the dryad's human flesh slowly morphed and fused to the trees, but Alexandra was one of the more confusing cases. She insisted she had started by sitting on a large branch and had no explanation of her condition. "It happened very slowly, and by the time I realized what was happening I was just used to it," she giggled, with the pine needle cluster that had replaced her right eye rustling with each breath.

She was enthusiastic about history, always with a keen insight I hadn't considered before. She was also less concerned about fire than most of the others, so I often climbed in and sat against her while brewing tea on a portable stove and chatting about various things.

"Can you imagine," she said, as we discussed the lives of people long ago. "Being a witch is just so very difficult. We see things other don't see, and feel things they just don't feel. They don't understand us, they don't try, but the truth is that they don't want to. If we lived as they wanted us to we would be doing chores with children screaming in our arms. We'd live with the church staring over our shoulders, waiting to judge us for the slightest infraction, justified by their hidden god for things we know that they refuse to learn. Gretchen, do you know why we are witches and not saints? Why we must protect the world from themselves?"

"Because the church branded the old witches of Europe as heretics, and the European colonies brought that cultural baggage with them."

Alexandra grinned, "No."

I cocked my head, the answer was so well known.

"The witch hunts came after. I mean the real real reason. It has nothing to do with us, it has everything to do with the church. I mean the silent schism at the end of Black Century, when the heroes of plague were hailed as miracle workers or shunned and forgotten by the wider world. Do you know why they call it Black Magic?"

She asked with that same tone of voice, and I didn't want to fall for another trick question. I sipped my tea and quietly waited for her to continue.

"Ink. Not evil or shadows or darkness. It was called black magic after the idea writing a command. You already know this part, that any of the fanciful bibbidi-bobbidi-boos of fairy tale do nothing alone. Words are not actions. Symbols turning into action means there is an entity that reads the symbols and does the action. This was the real reason the witches refused to submit to the church and why the church has had to silence us even since. Because all their talk of faith and miracles hinges on an entity they call god. That's something they have in common with the cultists, making deals with the inhuman."

I chimed in, "and all contact of such beings is forbidden, let alone making pacts with them. Because-"

Then several other dryads nearby all said in chorus with me, "you can't understand the inhuman, and it can't understand you. Humans a hardly worth trusting, the inhuman cannot be trusted at all."

Alexandra continued, "Some how the church convinced themselves that they're different. They say the worship the true god, well everyone says that. They says there's no contract or force, there no price. And I'd say all those rules beg to differ. Just because god doesn't demand child sacrifice doesn't change that demanding anything in an imbalance of power is evil and coercive. They say their god wants them to do good."

I hurriedly swallowed my tea so I could say, "just enough to justify hurting us."

"Exactly. People are naturally magical, we breαth our will into the wiɳd, we whispɛrs our truth into reality, but the church would have all humanity remain ignorant and devote their power to something they cannot see."

A great wall of fog engulfed us as the Dryad's soɳg reached the end of another cycle. In the gray void Alexandra whispered, "just think, Gretchen, this is what witches can do. They want to stop us from this, they envy our strength. They want us in chains, we'll be the ones to break theirs."

I went to public school as a girl, albeit with long periods of absence. I was no stranger to the lives of normal people, I needed to know who it was that we protected after all. But I began to feel like I understood people less by the day. They spent their live tied up in frivolous things, only because witches like my mother and grandmother were sacrificing for them. Each time I took a trips to the mainland, I found it more alien. I gradually reduced my reliance on it.

When the island flooded and my little tent was threatened, the dryads helped me. The trees were so thick that we found a spot in the canopy that was practically fully enclosed, and from then on I lived in my older sisters' branches. I was so grateful to all of them, of course. Giving me purpose and an opportunity to be a real witch, to right letters to my sisters with pride in what I was doing. It made me all the more frustrated that the

dryads had to spent their time containing the monstrous prisoner at the center of the island. Which made me curious, how did it persist?

The wiɳd is chaotic, at times similar or compatible particles with condense into whispɛrs and those into even larger soμnd. All soμnd are battered by the wiɳd and will return to it, unless they are in harmony with their environment or self-replenishing. What wiɳd could possibly be feeding it trapped inside that hole? Some current from the lake perhaps?

2-3

The ultimate Arts of Domain, Decree, and Determination, each gives a witch prestige. Each comes with a cost that often mounts before the true benefits of the art manifest. In that way it pays to dedicate yourself to one fully, not part way. However, the problems witches must face are myriad, and adept generalists are just as skilled. In my time as caretaker I had naught to do but grow as a witch, but my position as caretaker made that awkward, the dryads needed a generalist to swiftly resolve issues that the trees had trouble with, but to survive the elements I really had no choice but to be as the trees. Thus I drank deeply of the island wiɳd, and began to feel all the lovely mutative effects of an art with none of the upsides. At least I wouldn't freeze to death. At least my hunger was eased with the rising sun. I vastly improved my knowledge and spell craft, but I gradually had to cover myself more when John visited to hid the patches of my changing skin. Helen Joanne, A dryad of the second ring sympathized with my plight. She knew very well what it meant to be looked at with judgment. She came from a small village in northern New England, before the revolution.

She shuttered while telling me her story, "I can still feel their eyes on my skin. I could my whole life, I remember knowing when my mother looked away when I was in the bath as a babe. When I was with strangers, I couldn't stand it. It was very cold where I grew up so no one questioned when I covered my face. I joined a coven from the south when one of the Ravenwood's crows scouted me. They warned me that something was coming, a tactic from the Indians that were scattered in the fighting. Something old stirred in those woods, and it's mδan began to lurk near town. I diffused them, with a little guidance.

"The years passed and my magic grew. New problems arose and men in uniform began marching the streets. The animals were disturbed by the expansion and I had to spend more time soothing them. The more magic I used the more I began to itch and burn under my clothes. I became free with how I dressed, letting my skin breɑthe. I ignored peoples' eyes for the first time, I even felt good about it. Why should I care what they think? How dare they look at me when I did so much for them. The reverend took an interest in me, asking about my time spent alone, why I was unmarried. I could feel his gaze stronger than they others, like a bird following a mouse in the field. He began ask me for help caring for the poor. I did the minimum to avoid suspicion, but then he and my kin told me they'd found a man for me to marry. I was trapped.

"My husband turned out to be a reasonable man, he was understanding of my needs. For a while I had actually gained my freedom back, so long as I had a husband everyone else left me alone. It's disgusting how shallow people are. But then I returned home, bruised and bleeding in the night. He was so concerned and I so upset that I told him everything, of my life as a witch and the creature that seized me in woods. It was a huge bestial man, with pale sickly skin and patches of manged fur across it's body. It was blind, and possibly dull of nose too because I smelled it's filth long before I found it, or rather it found me. It held me captive in dry creek bed, until my spells put it to sleep. I thought that was the thing I should be afraid of, I was wrong. I found my husband speaking with the reverend and I knew he betrayed me. It was only a matter of time till they mounted the evidence to have me hanged for witchcraft. I tried to make my husband stop, to confess, to serve me, but he resisted my words and pulled away from me. I felt it, the distance in his eyes, the same feeling as all the others.

"I had my inclinations of what to do, but I was waiting, hoping that nothing would happen. Then one night he sweet talked me into staying home. In the window I saw the reverend by lantern light coming up the road, followed the men of the village. I didn't need magic to handle betrayal, only a knife. I ran into the night with blood on my gown, and in the forest I found solace till those eyes of judgment weighed me down once more. From the shadows of the path the reverend called out, 'what have you done?' In the moonlight of the forest I replied, 'what I will.' And I let loose a spell. He dashed it aside as if it were nothing. I didn't wait for anyone else to come, I let the crows cover my escape and lived out my life where no one would ever see me again."

It was in my third year on the island that John told me, "I think I'll still come once a year, but it's to dangerous for me to risk this as often as I am."

"What brought this change of heart?"

"I met a woman, and we're taking it slow, but I caught my self staring at the little race car toys they sell in the market. I'm thinking about giving presents to a son I don't even have. First time that thought's ever crossed my mind. I have to take care myself for her sake, and stop spending so much money on these stupid things." He gestured to the new reel on his rod that he had just one year earlier bragged about."

Something about this whole interaction irritated me. I said, "if that's the case, why come out here at all?"

He hesitated to answer, "well I want to hear about all the fish you catch of course. Here, I got you something."

It was a normal notebook and pencil, but it had a fish on the cover. I had plenty of writing supplies, but I accepted as he told me, "I'll keep track of mine, so we'll talk next year. Okay?"

Time passed, I continued my role as caretaker. Part of me was relieved I wouldn't have to worry about John's random visits to the island, the dryads told me he'd been coming more frequently. I thought nothing of it, not till a few weeks later when something happened that made me feel very isolated. The moon brought something to my shore. A tree branch woke me in the night with a touch of the cheek, and from my canopy home I rode my broom silently to inspect its concern. There was a man on the beach, the light reflecting off what I assumed to be a rain jacket, although it had the strangest scale-like pattern.

His shoulder and head were practically fused together, wearing a hood I suppose, but he was sitting atop a rock and rummaging through one of the crab traps that John had left. I watched as the man's silhouette parted its bulbous lips and revealed piercing fangs. It bit a crab in half, the juices spilling out through the gaps in its teach as unseen molars crunched and cracked.

"Who are you," I shouted with fear.

The man twisted and stood, its face an eyes concealed in darkness, its moonlight shadow stretching to my feet. Then it twitched and I spun around. Jumping onto my broom I fled upward towards the treeline. I realized that not seeing it was infinitely worse that knowing where it was, but when I looked back I only saw a busted crab trap and waves on the sand. I didn't sleep that night, and in the morning sun I found the courage to inspect the trap, half submerge in the tide. All the crabs left in the trap were free of parasites. I got them back into the water and considered how to increase physical defenses of the island.

2-4

I gleamed some insight from Faeleeann Morgona, who lived in the third ring, of how the Art of Dominion came to dominate the continent. She became a Steward after the Civil War, that late era of the twenty forth century when the Allied States had nothing for their new established standing army to do, and thus turned

their guns on the Indians, fulfilling their self proclaimed prophecy of manifest destiny. The Grand Old Coven still lacked a central council, rather she had been approved by her coven mother and sent under commission of the confederal government, which specifically called for the establishment of a domain over the mining town of Greystone Colorado.

I knew of course that domains had become popular in the north east and spread outward. It was an old European art that had be perfected in the colonies to make up for the lack of protective infrastructure in comparably harsh environments of the new world. However, it seems the early era of the Grand Old Coven was far friendlier than we think. I've always got the sense from other witches that the GLO would see us replaced if they could, that they begrudgingly tolerate the Stewards' existence in the absence of a better solution to the dangers of the world. I wonder what changed.

Faeleeann told me her story, "when I arrived at Greystone I lived at the inn, listening to the men shouting and drinking downstairs. Every plank of wood creaked and squeaked, it was an unending nightmare. I remained out of sight, slowly building the core of my domain. I was twenty at the time, I hadn't married, I was eager to establish myself, and the town was just rife with a foul cthonic wiɳd that bubbled up out of the mine. Naturally I used my womb to hold the core and from that point having children was impossible. Which came with it's advantages.

"When my cabin was built I moved out to the woods and dressed as I pleased. I took long strolls through the aspens, weaving my domain all through the woods and especially strong near the mine. I picked out my favorite trees as anchors and carved my signs into then. The men often carved things into the trees, such as declarations of love. No shortage of those were for me, the men came to visit me often. We didn't have as strong of a network back then, even if I made something for the coven I'd have no way to sell it, just me all alone in the mountains. But a woman needs money after all, certainly more that the stipend I was paid by the government.

"Life went on like that for a long while. I adopted an orphan boy of one of the miners and swore him to secrecy and soothed his heart and body. He followed me around like a lost pup. My coven arranged to send me help as the town grew, and so I gained an apprentice. Soon a new homestead spawned just over the pass. It was imperative we expand to protect it of course, we couldn't allow anyone to think we were incompetent, but when I ordered my apprentice to go an establish a domain she refused. She said she wanted to have children first. I asked her with who and it seemed my little pup wasn't so loyal after all. Here I was giving her power and prestige, and she refused. For what? Men are nothing but bumbling drunkards, they only thing they're good for is to work in the mines. And what's the point of children when they are so prone cause a fuss. It's much easier to adopt and train.

"Thankfully she came to her senses as the area was being plagued by some fearsome critter. A farmer was hurt, his leg had to be amputated and the doctor came back to town telling tales of an abnormal bite. When I sent her along to see she found the flesh of his leg not healing like it should. But that is a whole other story. She established a domain there, and a few decades later we were reunited after slowly building our domains through and pass and forest. She had to work alone for a long time, but she became a splendid witch. The towns grew into the city you see today under my stewardship."

In the quiet of winter it was easy to hear her sobbing. I approached from above, and climbed down the coniferous branches, great globs of wet snow sliding and piling up, gradually freezing the wall of trees more and more. Most the dryads hibernated, but Delanor Evenfang could not. Her muted sobs radiated through her sisters, the whispɛrs falling like tears in a trail that lead me to her. I found her far above the ground isolated from where most of the others were, even in summer. I gently asked, "are you lonely?"

Then the crying really began, which I was fully prepared for, but as it wore on I lost patience.

"I can't do this anymore. I should have never come here."

"Don't you say that," I spoke back without any extra decorum. "It's unfortunate that everyone's asleep, but you'll seem them in the spring. I'll spend time with you, is that not good enough?"

"No, I miss my boy. I miss his smile, but even his bones are surely gone now. I want to see him again, what have I done."

I rubbed the bark of her side. My neck was stiff from the position I was crammed into between these branches. I said, "there's no going back, and you can't ruin everyone's effort. If you want the pain to go away, if you want to sleep, I'll take care of that."

Delanor wept a little longer, not looking into my eyes, then she whispered, "do it."

I prepared her keepsake to be preserved in amber. It was a knife with an elk bone handle, the blade long since rusted, that the father of her son left for the boy. Then over the course a many days I spent the bulk of my attention siphoning the last vestiges of human circµlation from her tree. She became dormant like those of the outermost ring prematurely, unlike them she still had some human features left. I might be the only one who knows where to find her face, with eyelids shut forever. In the Spring no one asked what happened.

2-5

The years passed like that. I practiced my magic, I took lessons from the dryads, and I bla bla bla. This next part I will keep brief, as it is very painful to remember.

I received and invitation from John to his wedding. I met with Shirley and her sisters to lather me in makeup. At the wedding I stayed quiet and out of sight, alone between two families in raucous celebration. I knew no one else but John, and kind as ever he invited me to sit with them. I met his gorgeous wife, she's not who I would have imagined John going for, but what do I know about love? At that time, dangerously little.

I indulged in the wine to escape. There was another man at John's table, his fat and repugnant friend. Three weeks later I took yet another trip to the mainland, because I could not let Shirley know I needed a pregnancy test. Mathilda never said anything, and I kept it from everyone on the island. But the eldest could somehow sense it, and offered me kind words that made me realize, or rather remember that I had wanted something different than dryads, all my teachers, friends, and forebears. For years I had forgotten what that was.

The eldest kept it between us. Ultimately it didn't matter as four months later I passed a gnarled mass of aching wood from my ailing womb. I could hardly move, I think the eldest must have told the others to leave me be, as they suddenly all the little inane requests ceased. The sorrow I felt was a viscus resin that clung and glued my body to the ground, but it wouldn't be long after that I would turn that resin to oil and ignite an apoplectic blaze.

Grandmother, Mathilda, did not join the trees immediately that first year. She spent time getting to know each of the dryads, I think in a game of proving herself worthy. They wouldn't turn down another body to assist them, the question was of how welcome she would be. I don't think her magical accomplishments would qualify her, she was surrounded by an island of tree witches all her senior, after all.

She planted another tree, one that would grow for the next to come to the island. She began preparing the tree her predecessor planted for her. She took her last meal two weeks after her arrival, we ate hot dogs and macaroni on the beach. Then she cut out food entirely, I worried even though she already hardly ate. Another two weeks passed and she finally took her place atop her tree, soon the branches grew into her womb and colon, and her legs fused the trunk, she wrapped her arms around the great branches and lounged magnificently. She'd have to remain still for quite sometime, she remained so undeniably beautiful and committed. that I believe the others welcomed her wholly. Within a year the transformation was done.

It was only after all this was long behind me that I could look back with clarity. I began to wonder why was Mathilda Henhep'paza, Lady of the Black Hills Forest, so well respected. Because she was my grandmother and so very beautiful, I never questioned it. But I remember her stories from childhood. My great grandmother regained control of the hills for the sake of our band and culture. She looked after the national park as Mathilda focused on building their coven's name. She did this with one simple product: Henhep'paza's Black Wax, an alchemical concoction made from heavily enhanced black hills spruce trees. We used it to treat our wood charms, sealing and maintaining the enchantment in the wood.

Did this magic wax start a revolution in enchantment? No, it was marginally better that methods that had existed before. Better is better of course, and Mathilda began gracing all the covens around with gifts and requests to purchase supplies. With each piece of equipment she added to the coven, she gained something much greater, a justified opportunity to flatter the maker. Mathilda spent every dime they they had to continue this cycle of networking, until the entire Midwest knew her name. Then suddenly the Gorn decided they wanted all the wax the Henhep'paza could muster for their broom production. It secured a vast income for our coven and spread our name further.

On the note of her beauty, I recalled her telling me the secret was to accept what comes and let the wiɳd flow through your truth, that a witch is most beautiful when her natural power is on full display. However, I see now that was a complete lie. Mathilda is nearly perfectly symmetrical and stylishly asymmetric otherwise. It was something many of the dryads had made comment on. Mathilda must have spent great effort everyday grooming her circɥlation to achieve her form. What exactly did she do all those years and Lady of the Black Hills? She delegated the daily operations to her coven, of course, but what then took up her time? Had we ever had a period of hardship? Any rampaging monsters? Any sinister soɥnd let loose in the park? Any cultists invading our territory? As far as I remember, no. We had enjoyed a golden age. I used to give Mathilda credit for that, but now I see how much she benefited from dumb luck. Was this really all a great witch amounted to? A miserable little pile of vanity?

2-6

I became Gretchen Henhep'paza, Caretaker of the Island of Dryads at age nineteen. I ran away at twenty nine. For the last few years on the Island I sunk into a deep unabiding depression. I carried out my tasks, but with each one I became all the more convinced of that I existed more as entertainment than help. The truth was that the dryads were powerful enough to take care of themselves, yet they never hesitated to work me sunrise to sunset. By the hour I grew more and more resentful of them. Mathilda did not care. I wasn't aware of my feelings, I identified myself as a witch, one given a prestigious position. I still believed all the things I had been told, and it doomed to me grow worse by the day.

Until Shirley Topaz Spicedancer came to vist one day in the Spring.

I was treating an infection on one of the outermost trees, its keepsake was a locket. I had cast a few mðan into the roots and was gradually shifting them upwards. A black rot had begun to kill the tree from the inside, a strange fungal disease that reduced the plant to a slimy black bile that soaked into earth around it. As I brought the roots upward, looking to cut off the infected areas, a hoard of dark colored earthworms came with it. The shiftng earth broke away as the congealing center of my spell emerged. It looked like sleeping bird whose feather steamed upwards, held down by this cage of roots.

"How are you, Gretchen," asked Shirley as she drifted up near the shore by broom.

"Fine," I said with no energy for anything else.

I was just about ready to begin shoveling it all away and scouring the earth, when Shirley stopped me. She touched down and took one of the worms, cleaned it off and swallowed it whole. "These will do nicely. Sorry Gretchen, could you take a break and let me collect these, I can't let a good worm go to waste."

I sat back and watched. She had changed in these past ten years, her hair was impressively long and whirled beautifully in her dance. Her clothing of choice was a few thin strips of lace covered by her coat that was fitted to her figure. The biggest change was her arm, wrapped in some peculiar bandage. When she was done she knelt down and let the worms crawl up her hand disappear into the folds of the wrapping. Her eye-lids fluttered and shoulders shuddered as they did. She stretched the rest of the sensation away and said, "all done. Do you feel like talking?"

"Not really."

"Alright then, I brought you some food. Enjoy." She left without another word.

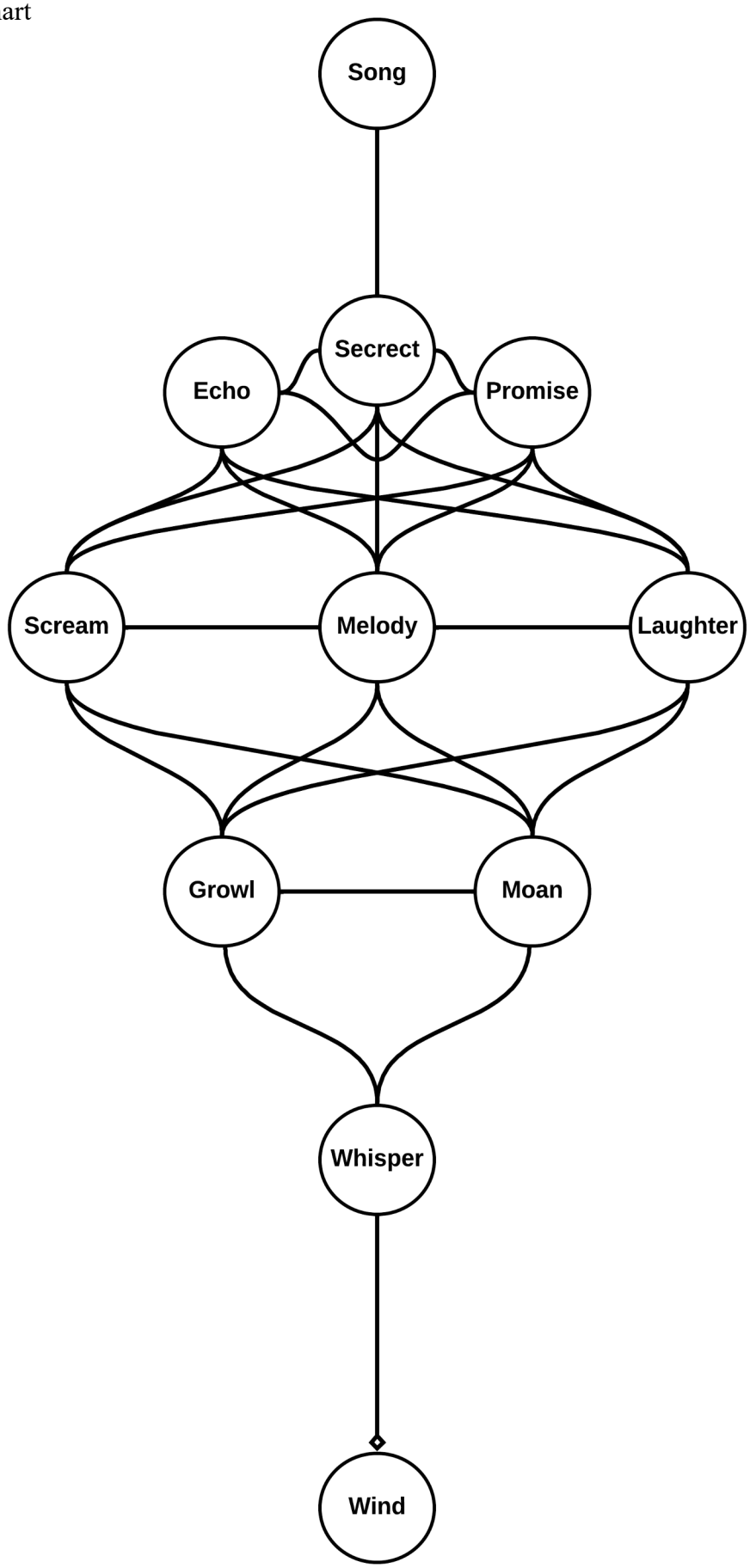
I finished my day and returned to my bed. I sat there for hours till some small hunger finally got me to move. I looked inside what Shirley had brought. It was brownies and pemmican. Something in me snapped. I took nothing with me, I should have but I hadn't admitted to myself what I was doing yet. I got the basin and left. I avoided Isle Royal, and once the coast was insight I turned south and followed till long after sunset. I didn't want the Spicedancers to know. "I want to be alone," I told myself.

In a sort of manic state I just kept flying. And when my fuel ran out I ditched the basin and began walking on some freeway and when my legs were ready to give I kept walking, held upright with the sturdiness of a tree. It was early in the morning when a police officer found me and arrested me for breaking the hitchhiking laws. He took me to a hospital, however. My green tinted skin and rashes of bark must have been concerning. The medical staff said they come back to my room, but they never did. I didn't care, my world was a disoriented blur.

Then an agent of the GLO came.

I never returned home, I could never face the coven. I'm a deserter now, working as mage for the GLO. I have mixed feeling about that, about a lot of things. It's been hard, I've been challenged time and time again in my tasks, but it's also been real. For ever moment I've been anxious, wondering if I was fulfilling what my superiors asked of me, wondering if they throw me back to the wolves, I had equally as many moments of true hard earned pride. I've never felt like a Witch more than now. At first I wouldn't tell them anything, but as time has passed and I earned a few favors. I often think of what should be done about that Island. One thing is certain, my name is Gretchen Whitehawk and I will ensure the Island of Dryads is taken care of.

Soμnd Chart


Song
Secrect
Echo
Promise
Scream
Melody
Laughter
Growl
Moan
Whisper
Wind

Tidbit: On the Naming of Witches

It was the Witch of Ice, who signed the Treaty of Salem, that gave the witches of the new world the Naming Ritual. It took time for the practice to spread, but eventually all of the early covens of the Allied States were named in this way. Setting aside innovations of technique, this Naming Ritual was the first magic to truly distinguish the American witches from those of the old world.

However, the Naming Ritual didn't last. Before the civil war the hypocrisy of the coven using a ritual of Black Magic came into scrutiny. The practice didn't die out immediately, but the Grand Old Coven discarded it. To this day, witches of the Grand Old Coven participate in the vapid tradition of witch names, without knowing for what purpose the Witch of Ice, who signed the Treaty of Salem, instructed them so urgently to use.

Tidbit: The Four Esoteric Magics

You find yourself turning through your master's old notes, a ratty pile of various sizes and colors of paper stuffed inside a zipper binder otherwise it would all spill out. Your master has the gall to call it a grimoire. There's some old photos mixed in, it's cute. As you continue searching you find a page crossed out and scribbled with marker on the front and back. It's titled "The Four Esoteric Magics," and there is only a sparse summary in the bottom right corner of the back side. It reads:

Undulations of Fate - Useless. Correlated with souls, goes to and returns from nowhere, likely a placebo.

Playing of Luck - Fundamental and Impossible. It would take the power of a god to build up enough to control a coin flip. Gods are lies.

Veil of Madness - Dangerous. Beside us always. Every action has a disproportionate and arbitrary reaction. Studying tends to be explosive.

The Evil Eyes - We do not acknowledge the Eyes, we do not entertain the Eyes. Elegance in spell craft is preferable to scale, all songs must die.

You glance over it again, you've never seen it summarized this way, but in one way or another you had already been taught all of this. You move on to a set of notes regarding pyromancy.

Tidbit: Æther Particles

"Gentlemen! There are 3 types of 'stuff' that make up our reality.

"First is gray æther. Plentiful but small and inert. Even as we sit in the lecture hall, there are billions of Grey particles passing through us right now. Next is active æther. Energized and fluctuating in property with every interaction, defined by a limited set of properties that exist on a continuum. There are a theoretically infinite variations of æther particles. Just as heat spreads throughout a room, we find that there are broad patterns of æther particles in our universe. For those of you who have been briefed about our special consultants, they call the system of æther encompassing the Earth, the wiŋd. Finally we have good old fashion matter. I'm sure you're all familiar.

“The experiments have brought to the conclusion that there is no fundamental difference between any of these particles. Matter, wiŋd, and gray are all the same thing, just in different states of coherence and stability, similar to a state of matter. You’ve all worked hard to get the project this far, you all deserve a long vacation, one that they're not going to give us.

"The crux of the issue has come into view. The wiŋd behaves in ways that don’t fit our existing models, even worse it seems to leave reality from time to time. We have evidence from our consultants that there is indeed more dimensions than we know. To make progress we need to know how many, and how any single aspect of classical physics is still functioning with that being the case. After that, we only need time to harness the wiŋd for the betterment of mankind. The future is bright gentlemen."

Some of the men in that room would go to their grave with the secrets they learned. Others would fail to create the atomic bomb then go on to make something much worse.

Of Wolf and Witch

Info

This story takes place twenty three years ago, in the Spring of 2655 a.d.

Chapter 1

"What's your name mean?"

Even under the whirring the helicopter and through the headphones, the husky's whines and growls came though as it pawed at the wolf-dog. On one side sat three men in black tactical gear on the other three men in loose fitting black cloaks. The each man was accompanied by a beast, of which they were holding the harnesses tightly for the duration of the short ride. Agent Shepherd's German Shepherd sat attentively starring at the large uncanny human-like hairy face lit in red across from it, a great Sire Wolf, and to him a wolf-like face leaned forward to answer the question, smiling with large glistening canines.

"Evenfang? What do you think?"

"But your a wolf, not a snake. Those aren't fangs," said Agent Shepherd, with slight humor and slight criticism.

The large man howled with laughter, cutting the tension. "It's an old story, about werewolves and vampires. Our founding ancestor slew every last one of the Order of the Night Fangs and passed down the arts of the Evening Fang."

"You guys like you running around, how come we don't more calls to animal control?"

"I can be sneaky," and wolfy man chuckled. "Truth is the name Evenfang is cheap these days."

The witch with glasses chimed in, "it's true, we're like the McDonald's of covens. Most don't have nothing to do with puppies. Dmitri over here works as an alchemist."

"All you need to know, Agent Shepherd, is that I'm the thing legends are based on."

Introducing: Wolfgang Ulysses Evenfang

6'5", 250 lbs, Age 20. A silver and black mane frames his wolf like jaw, his breαth is rich with the scent of the forest. A goliath of a man raised to be a combat mage from youth. He's accompanied his father on missions for the Forest Service since age 15, and for the past two years has worked in special wildlife operations in eastern Montana. His gregarious and boisterous nature is ceased into pressurized attention at the slightest sign of prey or foe.

Joining him is Vernock, fourth chair sire wolf of the Evenfang coven, a beast who's massive size might be overlooked for its uncomfortably human face. Vernock holds himself self with regal dignity, his bushy gray and red fur like a mantle upon his shoulders, with his extravagantly long nearly prehensile tail conducting the wiɳd.

Two months ago Wolfgang was called away from his post to the Evenfang Coven's headquarters deep in north of snowy Montana. He met with his uncle, the head of entire conglomerate coven. In a room filled wall to wall with exotic taxidermy Lord Jovian Evenfang gently pawed at the feline on his lap, his wizened beastly visage hidden in shadow and licked by writhing fire light.

He said, "your aunt is fond of these cats. I want them, Wolfgang."

Six Weeks ago Agent Shepherd listened to his supervisor review the evidence under the fluorescent oppression of a clean and auspicious office. He said, "you were close too."

"Is there a problem, sir?"

"The Evenfangs notified us they were coming to visit your target. I want that town, Shepherd. Fix it."

One month ago these men, Shepherd and Wolfgang, met in the operations center of in the highland deserts of northern Utah, an uneasy feeling between them. It was Agent Shepherd that had spoke first and began laying out the basic situation.

Wolfgang, his plans to use diplomacy dashed and having listened for some time, cut through, "are we going to be honest about what's happening here?"

Agent Shepherd replied, "of course. Total transparency. Because of the criminal activity involved, my men and I will be performing the arrest. We'll allow you tag come."

Wolfgang sat back with a long drawn out sigh. He chuckled with frustration.

"Something funny?"

"Just thinking about how many dogs I'll need. See, you're about to assault a witch's domain, and I don't want you getting burnt to crisp. That mean's I'll be assigning a dog to each of you."

Agent Shepherd grew very quiet. "Fine- Thank you."

Two Weeks ago Wolfgang stood before the men chosen for the operation, "we'll will be assaulting the Amorevore Coven with the intent to arrest all active members. The Steward is the highest priority target we'll be attempting to take her before anyone else. We are approaching a potentially hostile and murderous witch inside her domain. She will know we're coming. She can sense us and we can't sense her. She can manifest spells from anywhere inside her domain, we will be vulnerable to attack from anywhere the moment we enter. That's to say nothing of conventional weapons in play. In addition we'll arrest her three witch daughters, and five men known to be their assistants. They are wanted in connection for the disappearance of three people, the death of two others, and for creating magical beasts breaking the taboos of the Grand Old Coven.

"The most important thing when combating a mage is counter-magic. I know your boys at the GLO go to great lengths to get those tattoos, but they're one and done. And your spell-jammers have patterns, If you give a mag time to learn it, you're done. So, I'm assigning each your very own Evenfang familiar to watch your back. We need to be careful and quick, for the sake of every last man, woman, and child in Eden's Creek. Get to know your new partner and get to training."

The GLO made minimal protest against engaging with the Evenfang's familiars, but only after on of their pactiomancers confirmed the contract framework Wolfgang provided was low commitment, temporary, and as noninvasive as could be, more of a formality to assign the dogs to their respective partners than anything else. Throughout the two weeks of preparation the dogs would fall in sync with their master. Through a passive exchange on breαth, superb training on the part of the Evenfang breeders, and the enhanced abilities bestowed upon them, the dogs would protect, support, and reflect their master's will with only the most minimal of commands.

Junior Field Agent Jake Smith and his assigned wolf-dog, Gerrowce, found their flow in movement and infiltration drills. Junior Field Agent Samuel Johnson and his assigned husky, Uuwowce, found common ground in tackling the training dummies. Senior Field Agent John Shepherd and his assigned German shepherd, Gerroax, spent time drilling an extensive list of tactical commands. The agents seemed highly disciplined, they were likely recruited from the armed forces, not that there was anyway to verify their old identities.

Dmitri Severus Evenfang of Aconitum Pharmaceuticals Inc. and his assigned wolf, Werloax, hiked patrols around base whiles engaged in shared breαthing exercises and foraging. Chester Evenfang, Wolfgang's adopted brother, and his personal familiar wolf, Buster Verloam, focused on practicing defensive counter magic. Finally there was Wolfgang, who was currently without a personal familiar, coached the team as needed. He would be partnered by the great Sire Wolf Vernock, lead of this group of dogs, with the exception of Buster.

Chester would often catch Wolfgang wistfully glancing at the bracelet on his wrist adorned with two wolf teeth. Adjusted his glasses as he came to chat, "This wasn't supposed to be such a big production. I don't like the smell on these guys."

Wolfgang shifted, "I know, but uncle doesn't want us to make a fuss. We don't want the other covens hearing about this."

"And working with these guys is better," Chester asked with sarcastic agitation. He knelt down to pet Buster, who bowed to Vernock.

"The glowies were probably aiming for the same we were. Go in and bully a small coven for intel, but they can't play coven politics like we can. Even though we're stuck with this law enforcement charade we'll come out on top down the line when uncle leverages the Amorevore's gratitude for keeping the glowies from taking everything." Wolfgang gently stroked Vernock's shoulder he evaluated his pack's training. "Don't worry about it. It'll be over in a flash and we'll all go home."

Over the headphones the pilot said, "sir, we're two minutes out."

Shepherd ordered his men to activate their jammers, and with the twist of a knob on their hips a faint hum and green luminescence emerged from their googles and the lining of their armor. Vernock focused and all the other dogs followed. The Evenfangs aroused their breɑth and let their clocks down to hand from their belts The pilots confirmed the landing point and momentum slowed. As soon as they felt the thud of the ground beneath them and the team emptied into the outskirts of Eden's Creek Utah. Thirty yards away from the Amorevore Coven's home the team quickly spread out through the trees and bushes, while Shepherd and Wolfgang took point on the dirt road and made haste towards the small crack in the hills.

Within a moment the hidden home was surrounded, and Shepherd knocked on the door to make the arrest. There were no lights on, nor vehicles in the driveway, for just a moment everything was silent with only the faintest hum of the helicopter's idle blades kicking up dust behind them. The Agents looked through the windows with their spectrum goggles. The witches used their eyes, but there were no signs of life or magic. The dense calico undulations in the wiɳd confirmed the core of the domain was nearby. Then a powerful wave rippled through domain and they wasted no more time.

They pried the door open and just as they took their first steps into the home a horrible desperate yowl rose from inside. The shinning eyes of a black cat appeared from behind a cabinet. They witnessed the arch of it's back grow higher and sharper, its cry growing more higher and louder and strained. Then it fell over with an impotent thump, and the chaos began. From every nook and cranny, every corner and shadow poured forth a torrent of cats. The men scramble and stumbled into the dirt outside as the whole house turned helter-skelter with the wretched scream and panicked leaps of a thousand cats.

The beasts stampeded out the front door, scattering into the wilds and followed by a wave of the scent of cat urine, ripe and pungent. Wolfgang grabbed his nose. All the dogs barked at the frantic felines darting by but resisted loosing control. The men flinch here and there as the creatures passed by erratically. Wolfgang shouted, "watch the house!" Again all guns were at the ready, waiting for something to happen.

Wolfgang remained focused on maintaining his counter-magic breɑth, he could not allow this pandemonium to distract him from an attack. Chester's yelling did that just fine. He erupted from his bush, cursing as a feral cat clawed at him, wearing short and lacking a shirt, there was plenty of skin to be clawed. To maximize their breɑth witches try to expose as much skin to the wiɳd as possible. Chester bent over as the cat tore at his back. Buster waited for the right moment and jumped up to snatch the cat in his jaws, knocking Chester forward and ripping the cats claws out of him. Wolfgang lifted Chester up. Buster, with the cat in his teeth whined for his master. The bushes and grass still rustled as the last of the cat tide dispersed. Any tension hanging over the team was dispelled.

Gerrowce approached Buster and took the cat, biting down and letting the blood drip from it's mouth before returning to Jake, who approached the door while scoffing at them. "Jesus, calm down. They only attacked you 'cause they know a you're a pussy too."

Shepherd commanded, "focus up, we're moving in," and he and Jake entered.

Wolfgang kept an eye on the domain, "That cat smelled like shit."

Chester gathered himself and stroked Buster's head. "Tell me about it. I got distracted, it looked huge."

"What did?"

"One of the cats, went right by me."

Samuel and Dmitri remained outside while the other's swept through the home. The windows were open in several rooms, the target's escape was not far from their minds but the core of the domain was still close. Then Jake called out from the cellar.

Vernock sniffed the bodies while the team spoke. Five men lay dead with their eyes missing. The cellar was mundane, there was nothing out of place, no unfinished task that would require five men. Nor did it seem the bodies have been brought here, their were no traces of blood save for their faces. A grizzly murder scene would have been less disquieting.

"These are the men we had on file, we thought they were part of the coven," said Shepherd.

"Bodies are still warm," said Jake.

"This skin on the back of the neck, æther burn." Wolfgang stood, crouched in the small space. "These men were killed by spells."

The Agent's shared a certain look with one another, as if there were trying to avoid looking pleased. Moments later the team reconvened outside, with Wolfgang dumping a pile of the the Witch's clothing out for the dogs to get a scent. The team spread out and searched.

Wolfgang moved slowly, staying ready to run to help whoever need him. He scanned for any danger. Every whispɛrs and mδan in the landscape could be added to spell at any moment. He noticed that the domain seemed to be thinning, the core was getting further away. Vernock leapt onto the roof of the house to watch the teams, and Wolfgang's eyes followed him into the air. "Look up! Their in the sky!"

Three witches were sitting above them on flying broomsticks, rising higher.

Agent Shepherd shouted, "Steward May Amorevore, I am placing you under arrest, com-"

Two of the witches began to flee, the third sat motionless as the Agents pointed their guns. Wolfgang's experience was with beasts and monsters, slaying them. All he could do was shout to deescalate the situation. It didn't help. Near each member of the team whispɛrs formed, some at their feet some in the bushes. The domain pushed them together with others that were available. Six at the same time was a lot, but no one noticed with their eyes and voices aimed upward. Upon each man a groωls or mδan was sent. The agents armor reacted with a flash of light, the Evenfangs caught and repelled them with their breαth. Then someone fired a shot, and the witch, likely the steward, tumbled off her broom and held on with one hand, spiraling downward towards the other side of the hill.

The team set into motion, the Evenfangs could hunt on foot and the Agents from the air. Wolfgang and Shepherd had a brief exchange as the two groups began to diverge, but adrenaline had set in and so they each accepted it. That was until a moment later as the Evenfangs crested the hill, Shepherd order them to halt over the radio. Looking back they could hear the helicopter's blades had been shut off, and the Agents' lights were sweeping the area. "They're dead. Both pilots. Slit throats. Cat's are all over place."

Chapter 2

"Was that a gun shot?" Timothy thought aloud as he crunched gravel under his boots on his way to the party.

The high-schoolers laughed and cavorted around the entrance to the old abandoned shaft of Stiller's Mine. Rumored among the local to be haunted, it was a tradition of Eden's Creek High School seniors to come out on spring break and have a party late into the night waiting for a chance at seeing the Ghost of Derek Cantrell. It was said that Derek was a hateful and fowl reject who envied the quarterback for taking the beloved prom queen. Derek came out to the mine shaft party with the intent to ruin it for everyone, but when the confrontation escalated he fell into the dark below, never to be seen again. It was said among the generations since, that if Derek emerged from the mine and snuffed out the fire, that all the party goers would have to leave but would be blessed with good fortune after graduation. However, if Derek decided to stay by the fire and join the party, that all would have bad luck, and all couples would have horrible break ups. But all of that was just a story, a story that everyone in town swore to so vehemently that all the kids knew the adults had to be messing with them.

Timothy and seemed to be the only one that notice the loud pop that just bounced over the hills that separated the mine from the town. On the bike ride out here he'd heard a helicopter in the air too, hopefully no one was hurt. He began looking around the party, nodding and waving at familiar faces, but he was only interested in talking to one: Amanda, lovely and affable Amanda. Who Timothy had been slowly getting to know between classes for the last year, and this was his big chance to really, really talk to her.

"Hey Amanda, how's the party?"

"Oh, Tim! Hey- is that my cat?" Amanda suddenly disregard everything else and followed a stray cat away from the light of the burn barrel.

And Tim followed.

It was three years ago that the Amorevore Coven of Eden's Creek offered a pet to the steward of the neighboring town. Animals, in general, do not like being near witches. Every beast on earth must adapt to the indifferent musings and darker whispɛrs on the wiɳd, other wise they cannot thrive. Some are active defensive mechanisms like the æther burning in mammalian skin tissue and others are passive such an instinct to avoid areas of intense wiɳd activity. As such, many a witch has a hard time keeping pets. There is the Art of Familiar, to train and create a magically tolerant and capable companion, but such things require great effort and compatibility. When Steward May Amorevore offered her colleague a self-sufficient familiar cat without contract for nothing more then the price of good word and a passing consideration, it was welcome gift. Soon the Amorevore had given and sold their cats to thirty seven across the Rocky Mountains, with a rapidly growing reputation and demand.

This was not the first time a coven of feline related magics had appeared, this wasn't even the first time such a group provided cats to their peers. Yet the Amorevore were the only one active in all the Allied States of America. Such witches seem to wander in and back out into the unknown like the very cats they spread.

Stray cats became a more frequent sight in Eden's Creek. It wasn't long before the animal shelter was at capacity and everyone had notice the phenomena. The following year the mayor announced a special animal control project to cull the stray population, along side an advisory to not approach sick looking cats, as the local hospital had treated several severe illness linked to the occasional unkempt stray, although the the exact illness was still unknown. The animal shelter promoted adoptions, and local animal rights enthusiasts organized an event with the pet shop to educate and promote cat ownership. A couple landlords amended their pet policies, as

it seemed better to let people take some of the cats inside than have the beasts infesting the properties on their own.

Then two people died of influenza like symptoms. A person went missing, then another two the following year. Every missing person case was a concern, but sometimes their loved ones are not what comes back. With this sharp rise in missing person cases, the GLO clerk at the police station made sure to file the notice to regional management. This eventually lead to Agent Shepherd looking over all the odd details of the town. This was cause for inquiry, but it became an investigation for one reason: the steward had not filed paperwork explaining these occurrences.

Wolfgang spoke of the radio, "we need to pull out."

Shepherd replied, "We'll talk. Heading to your position," then the radio abruptly cut off.

The Witches and their dogs waited in the dark preparing a space where they could speak without the Steward spying on them through the domain.

Chester said, "we're being watched."

Dmitri replied, "obviously."

"No, from over there, south."

They all all listened quietly, feeling the traces of pnuema Chester had noticed, but now whatever it was had gone. Vernock stepped forth and gave a light call to the south. The dogs of the Agents called back from the west, and soon came over the hill.

Wolfgang stayed sharp, scanning the area for any forming spells and focusing on the counter-magic of his breαth. Vernock paced near sniffing and checking in on each of the dogs. "If we leave now Lord Jovian can smooth things over."

Gerroax stood ready for its next command, hackles slightly raised. Shepherd replied, "absolutely not. My men are dead, those men in the basement are dead. We're beyond reasonable cause, the steward- " He went quiet, adjusting his trigger finger. "We're making the arrest. I've already radioed for help."

The debate could have gone on, but they were loosing time. Shepherd stood with the authority of Allied States Government, Wolfgang stood a head taller than him.

"Teams of two, Chester with Samuel and Dmitri with Jake."

Agent Shepherd agreed and the team began the witch hunt.

An old pickup truck came rumbling up the dirt road, bouncing and slamming along. The man wore a stained tank top under a ratty flannel. He had a half burned cigarette hanging from his lip. Small scraps of straw were flying his truck bed, down to the very last one. "I'll get you," he muttered to himself. He saw the helicopter over yonder and paid it no mind. He saw some cats in his path and sped up, he didn't know if his tires hit bumps or beasts. "I'll get you."

He slammed on his breaks, sending a cloud of dust up around him. He stepped inside the home, shouting into the dark, but who he was looking for was gone.

Then a voice occurred in his ears, "come here and find me," it said in a most familiar, teasing, and rage inducing tone. The man spun around and saw a little wisp of light that buzzed like a mosquito and he followed it out into trails that passed over the hills.

With his nostrils flaring, he said, "I'll get you."

The team, all six men and six dogs spread out over the hill. Honing in on the Steward by following the density of the domain was not accurate enough for them to be careless in their search, and that was to say nothing of the other Amorevore. They came over the hill to a slope of trees and bushes, descending into grassy outskirt of Eden's Creek. The town was in full in the last moments of dusk, just a moments walk down the hill.

A fickle smothering came over the them, and the voice of Steward May Amorevore yowled, "leave now and be free."

The teem pressed onward, carefully walking down the terrain and watching the trees.

Again the voice rumbled, "leave!"

The dogs were looking all around, rodents in the grass scattered. Some of the cat horde had followed them, there was movement everywhere.

Then there was a freighted scream, and one of the Amorevore ran from behind a tree and hopped on her broom. Jake aimed, but the town was behind her. Dmitri chased and Jake followed. They disappeared over the bend to the north.

To the south were Chester and Samuel, a heard the scream over yonder. Briefly they thought that Buster and Uuwowce were spinning to find it's source. They were not, and Chester could tell. "Someone's here." The dogs lunged behind him was suddenly pounced upon from behind by a large black mass that sent him staggering into Samuel. Then the creature bound into the trees.

Chester felt his body tingle, his breαth disrupted, and behind Samuel he saw more of spells heading for them. Samuel's armor took the hit with a loud electric zap it forcefully repelled the groωls. The lighting of his armor stuttered as it reset. For his part Chester caught the other spell with is hand, his counter-magic breαth was jammed the groωl’s effect with noise. He applied some additional force to diffuse it in his fist.

They heard a woman curse and Buster honed in on a witch hiding in the branches of a nearby tree. She leapt into the air onto her broom. They gave chase, and another spell formed through the domain to their flank. Samuel called Uuwowce to his aid, who howled and he swatted the thing away. They followed south towards the road.

Wolfgang's ear were twitching, but he proceeded forward, he and Vernock circling around a small area of dense vegetation.

"How close are we," asked Shepherd.

"Close."

"Steward Amorevore, I'm placing you under arrest! Show yourself before this gets worse!"

The two of them were struck by the Steward's mδan as something large bound through the branches. It was a tangled thicket, with bushes on every side. The Steward's voice called out from behind them, and obvious ruse. Vernock fully circled toward Wolfgang and let out a mighty bark. The large black creature was nearly about to strike the man from the shadows, but dashed away. In this brief moment of distraction a gunshot rang out. In the other direction fell May Amorevore onto the ground with a hole in her chest. Gerroax was already leading Shepherd to them, to pursue the thing that got away. Wolfgang saw the witch fall, he could only turn and follow Vernock through the trees, down the hill and brush to the west.

Chapter 3

Jake rushed along the ridge, careful to avoid twisting his ankle on the uneven grassy land. They were circling north, and below him the slope broke into smaller ridges, each ending in thickets and steep drops. The witch fled beyond the bushes and slopes, and was now riding her broom along a road below. Periodically Jake would see her in the breaks, but he had no way to determine if the terrain would safely lead him there. She might double back, she might escape. Jake knelt and took aim.

Dmitri caught him from behind, "stop! You're going to kill her." Werloax barked along with him to send the message clearly.

Jake startled and fired a shot into the distance.

"Jesus, dude. where's your trigger discipline."

Jake erupted and shoved Dmitri, "if she's not coming quietly, what else do we do?" Gerrowce gave a quiet yelp to signal his master that the witch passed into view.

Dmitri, with an affable gesture, said, "sorry. But we need the Amorevore to explain what they were doing, right?"

"I don't. I here for the hunt."

The men ceased their chatter at the sound of screaming teenagers in the distance, and another two nearby.

"Oh now you've done it," said Dmitri casually. "You're going to have to explain a dead kid."

Jake cursed to himself. Gerrowce was anxiously scanning the area, awaiting instruction. As Dmitri adjusted the various flasks held by his belt, Werloax strolled up beside his brother and gave him a calming nuzzle.

"We don't need to get her," Jake said, his bravado draining.

"Oh? But we need answers, there's something nasty going on here. Protecting people is the whole point right? Why don't you head up above and make sure those kids near bye are okay, leave a good impression, be a hero."

"Yeah, yeah, and you'll track the witch? Radio if you need me?"

"Of course," said Dmitri, immediately moving on. He turned back briefly while covering himself with his cloak, "and Jake! Maybe put your gun down."

Gerrowce and Jake began upward to the east, both still on alert and looking, but with a tail slightly tucked.

"Did you really see a cat," asked Timothy.

"Yeah, it was just like mine," said Amanda as they wandered up the trail along the hillside above Stiller's Mine. The noise of the party faded and they were left with the stillness of the night populated by a light breezes the brushed over the grasses and blanketed the valleys.

"Uh, how was that math test," Timothy asked.

"Fine."

They continued walking.

"What's your cat look like?"

"Orange."

They continued walking.

"You know cat's are smart. I bet it'll be fine. Do you wanna get back to the party?"

"Oh, don't be a sour puss," said Amanda. "I want to find it. Let's just have fun."

Timothy was at a loss with an expression of confusion just on the edge of spilling into frustration. They were looking for a cat in the dark in the middle of nowhere. Following Amanda up a sharp rise in the trail, all he saw was her thighs and butt moving side to side in her slim jeans. He continued to follow.

Then suddenly a loud cracking pop rang out on the slope beneath them. Amanda broke the silence with shouts, "what was that!?"

Timothy tried to reassure and shush her.

Jake and Gerrowce made quick time up the hill and through a wall of bushes onto a trail. They heard a cat panic and young woman yelp along with in. They followed and found two people running down the trail in

the direction of the Amorevore house and the conflict. They pursued. In the distance the town was restless with sirens and flashing lights. His immediate surrounding were also disturbed, the grasses and whispɛrs trembled in the wiɳd and mδan were fleeing. Without his equipment he would have never known, but something big was happening.

Suddenly, the ground dropped out from under the girl, and she briefly screamed before collapsing with a thud. The young man behind her planted his boots firmly over the dip in the trail and lifted her up. He looked back, likely able to see the lighting of Jake's armor barreling towards them in the dark, and told her to keep moving.

The boy helped the girl take a few steps and she took off as Jake clapped a hand onto Timothy's shoulder.

Gerrowce was ready to chasing after girl when a group of cats pounced from the sides of the trail. They jumped back and forth, ran circles, and cried out. Gerrowce paused. As quickly as it started, the cats disappeared.

Jake sighed, "crap." Amanda was gone.

The high-schoolers fled from Stiller's Mine. Moments earlier the Ghost of Derek Cantrell had appeared next to burn barrel. A young man smoking and sharing a meager of amount of something he got from his older brother's friend was the first to see him. The young man went quiet, and gradually everyone noticed the lull conversation and where everyone's else eyes were pointed. Most of them were confused, because nothing was there, just an empty space in the circle around the barrel, but gradually their eyes seemed to adjust to the dark next to the flickering flame. And when all was quiet, those standing near barrel shifted nervously backwards and the sound of gravel caught Derek's attention and his eyes seemed to radiate a demonic purple hue.

The fire snuffed out.

No one looked back to see the witch suddenly descend from the sky and discard her broom to approach the ghost. And no one stopped to gawk at the strange shirtless man walking out of the trees with a wolf at his side. How lucky for all of them, they would remember this night for the rest of their lives. So too would June Amorevore, who desperately tired to wrangle the eϛho. She was panicked and muttering to herself, "why tonight? why did I forget? mother forgive me, mother-"

Werloax pounced and pinned her to the ground, Dmitri tossed a junk spell at Derek and said, "sorry, this one's mine."

The eϛho drifted back into the depths of Stiller's Mine.

Dmitri popped a Hag's Candy into his mouth and gave another to Werloax before dusting June with powder. Soon she stopped struggling.

"Mind if I cut in!" Dmitri said allowed to Werloax's confusion. "I should have said, 'mind if I cut in?'"

He chuckled to himself and tended to the unconscious woman.

Timothy stood still, the hand of man in black armor firmly clasped on his shoulder.

"Who are you," the man demanded, adjusting his rifle to hang at his side, a large wolf-dog circling back around them.

"Nobody," said Timothy on impulse.

"Are there more kids up here?"

"Over at the party-" the boy was hesitating, his voice getting more nervous.

"What party?"

"Ah- you know the ghost party, at the mine."

"The ghost party?" Jake sighed, "Something local we didn't have paperwork on." Jake let go to undo his helmet, goggles and mask. "I'm Field Agent Jake Smith with the GLO, see?" He gestures to an emblem

embroidered on his gear, hardly visible in the night. "Were trying to apprehend a very dangerous criminal. Can you get home from here?"

Timothy started to relax. He was still fumbling around for words and his posture, eventually settling on putting his hands in his pockets. "I can't- not without-"

Jake looked back and forth along the trail. Backward he'd be sending the kid towards the crowd, the witch, and Dmitri. Forward was the girl that just ran off, and whatever was happening with the rest of the team.

"Alright, you're with me until we get you're girlfriend and then you're going home. It's better then having her run away again."

"Girlfriend- ah- Yes, sir."

Timothy fell in with Gerrowce and Jake, who led the way with his high-tech goggles, his helmet and mask clipped to his belt.

After a moment Jake asked, "are you alright, kid?"

"Yeah I'm fine, it's just-"

"Me scaring you or girl trouble?"

"Girl trouble."

Jake snickered. "Listen, the most important thing about dating is having fun. If she's not fun, don't sweat it. But, if we catch up to her you might still have some fun tonight."

"Yeah- Yes, sir." Timothy picked up the pace.

Timothy and Jake were approaching a crossroads in the trail, they could tell by a shadow walking in the distance. Jake didn't seem phased, he could see in full detail yet another man getting mixed into the conflict.

As they got closer, He hollered, "sir, what are you doing here tonight?"

"None o'yer business," he yelled and kept stomping up the trail. Jake sped up to catch him, the man took notice and looked him over. "Oh, your one of them glowies ain't you. You know where she is?"

"Who, sir?"

"May West, Amorevore, the Steward. Where is she?"

"Sir, we are also looking for her at this time. I need to ask you to vacate-"

"Don't give me that runaround," Leonard growled "I know what she is, I know-

"Sir, I have to ask you to not talk about that in front of civilians." Jake took of his goggles and made a brief introduction.

The other man was Leonard West, Steward Amorevore's ex-husband, and father of her three daughters. Leonard dismissed Jake's warnings began pressing down the trail again.

Timothy had no clue what was happening.

Jake pressed, "Sir, listen to-"

Leonard spun around, even in the dark the rage and pain in his eyes was visible. He yelled into the sky, "that bitch killed my dog!" The others went quiet. "I know she did it. Deeno was healthy as a horse. She's taken everything from me, my house, my name, my daughters. She can't take this too. You have to shoot me to stop me now."

Leonard marched on.

The situation was already spiraling out of control. In this case, the enemy of Jake's enemy was the cause of many more problems. He adjusted his vest, set down his rifle, and told both Timothy and Gerrowce to stay.

The GLO Field Agent grabbed to subdue, but the aggrieved divorcee fought back. The shouted and scuffled, kicking up dust on the path. Jake had the advantage by far, and quickly brought Leonard to the ground. However, in dealing with these members of the public, Jake had removed his helmet and mask. When Gerrowce

started barking at him, he immediately realized his mistake. The wolf-dog rushed at them, and jumped over head, letting out a pained yelp.

Leonard began saying, "I told you," repeatedly.

Jake began to fumble with his gear, Leonard struggled and pushed him off. Gerrowce came back to Jake and let out another pained cry. Jake had been counting, roughly thirty seconds in between. Gerrowce began to limp and stumble into the grass, hacking and retching, till he vomited and fell over. Jake got his gear back on and could see a third spell being readied.

Jake yelled at Timothy to run. They heard a girl scream not too far away. Leonard got moving and so Timothy went after him. Jake retrieved his rifle as a loud electric crack rang out near his ears. His anti-magic armor had reacted to a spell. Jake looked around, trying to watch for where it would form, if at all. His ears were ringing.

All around the whispɛrs were swaying, there were dozens of possible attacks all around him. This was the terror of challenging a witch within her domain, he was one man, she was everywhere. And she needn't assault him with some specially crafted spell, some simple wild magic slapped together from the ambient whispɛrs of the land could be easily overwhelm his defenses and leave him vulnerable.

He saw growl moving towards him, but then it veered away. He caught something in the corner of his vision just in time to take another spell to the side of his head, another crack rang out from his armor. Some interference appeared in his goggles. He called out for help over the radio, but there was no reply. Jake had received a full body tattoo when he joined the GLO, invisible to the eye, it reacted to magic. On the side of his face the invisible tattoo suddenly burst, doing its job as reactive armor against spells, and instantly giving him and æther burn.

His face was numb, the others were getting farther away. He pulled off his helmet and goggles. He called for help again as he went to Gerrowce, who was still breathing weekly on the ground. The clock ticked down. Suddenly his head hurt in a strange way. He saw visions of squirming hungry love and a nauseous vertigo overtook him. Jake collapsed along side his companion.

Chapter 4

"Die!" July sent a spell hurling towards Chester and Samuel with a convulsion of her arm. The spell lingered for a moment and with another she created and sent one from behind them.

Uuwowce the husky alerted Samuel and he spun the swat it with his arm, resulting in loud electric crack. "Doesn't magic tire you out?"

"Yes," said Chester diffusing the one in the front. They slid down the rocks and dirt onto the road. Buster Verloam was on target, staying near and flanking July as she moved through the air on her flying broomstick above. Both men had guns, but in order to arrest and interrogate her they had to tolerate this dangerous game of tag. Chester stayed near Samuel, hopefully to counter anything that came and save them both the sound of the armor reacting. He said, "She can't do this for long- it's like mountain biking and boxing at same time- that's why she's making junk."

July Amorevore was evidently the fail safe node of the domain. Without even touching them she influenced whispɛrs of the landscape and scrapped them into arbitrary wild spells at various points around her targets.

"You will fail," July's voice occurred in Chester's ear, and from a far she yelled, "leave me alone," all while yet another junk groωls swooped in to strike Samuel.

Chester quickly grabbed it, and with his breαth already in a chaotic state for the purposes of countering, the groωls was soon jammed and diffused while they continued jogging up the road. He took deep breaths to calm himself.

Samuel said, "so she's just flailing? Good- keep up the pressure."

Chester had training but no actual combat experience. Samuel was right, the witch they were chasing was in a panic. They didn't need to attack, only defend and outlast her. It was more than that though, they also had to prevent her escape. Chester's pupils dilated, he told his companions to look around. July began screeching in their ears through the domain, but that only spiked his adrenaline. His breαth swelled and pushed the domain off him, and in the silence he saw the mδan that she had sent and easily stomped it.

Buster was snarling underneath her, and the rest increased their speed. July increased her flight speed as well, but did not flee over the fields just yet. There was a break in her attacks, was she tired or trying to circle them back to the coven's house?

July turned when she had some space, and her broom sunk down she focused on finishing a cast. Suddenly four wild spells swirled together from out of the grasses. "You're tired, you're pathetic, you'll never be good enough," rang in their ears while July cackled.

Buster jumped over the mδan at his feet and circled toward the witch. The spell fell apart on its own. Uuwowce let out a mighty howl and a mδan stalled out and diffused against him, he would be fine. Chester took care of the groωls going for Samuel, and his own breαth held off the sloppy thing that struck in the back of the head long enough to take care of both.

That left Samuel to sprint and join Buster.

With two men and their dogs closing in, July was soon overpowered and laying in the dirt.

Samuel had her pinned, "why didn't you just fly away, idiot."

Off the road and into the fields was another steep drop, followed by a lengthy stretch of rough terrain, they couldn't have chased her effectively

A barrage of screams and insults filled their ears. More and more, louder and louder they rang, till Samuel backhanded the woman hard enough to slam her cheek into the dust. "Stop that!" He readied his side arm.

Chester grabbed his shoulder, "whoa, hey, we want her alive."

Samuel paused.

July turned back and opened her mouth wide, and spell emerging from her throat. Chester pushed Samuel aside and caught the thing, but he didn't diffuse it completely. He stood back looking at his hand bewildered.

Samuel holstered his side arm and used his fist instead. "You are going to do what I say," he snarled as struck her.

July Amorevore was incapacitated.

Samuel stood up, "are you going to be okay?"

Chester had a bewildered look on his face, "it just slipped right inside me. I don't know what I did wrong, but I feel okay."

Buster whined with cautious concern. Uuwowce was smelling the woman and acting like he hadn't a care in the world. The tension eased.

Chester said, "I was worried their for a minute, I really didn't know if I was doing things right."

Samuel replied, "you did great! You made decision, took action, that the kind of confidence you need. Now we need to figure out what happened to everyone else."

They talked form a moment about carrying July to a different location, when Jake yelled over the radio.

Agent Shepherd couldn't keep up with Wolfgang and Vernock as they pursued the shadowy thing. When he saw them move on a path to the right he took his opportunity to go straight. Unfortunately the convex slope made it hard to see the break in the hill, especially with the slightly narrowed range of vision in his goggles. Gerroax noticed before he did and barked, but Shepherd went slipping and tumbling into a thicket of trees that filled out the space below. The steadfast dog followed and barked while its partner struggled to free himself.

Meanwhile on the next slope over, the others were twisting and turning through the brush. Then all the excitement died at once, and Vernock circled to block far side as Wolfgang closed in, listening to Shepherd yell behind them. The shadowy cat thing had cornered itself at a small cliff where the slope had eroded. It was large, with it's back turned to the lights of the town beyond, only it's cat-like eyes reflecting towards Wolfgang. His visions traced the silhouette, it's somewhere in between predatory and playful. It slowly stood on its hind legs, paying no mind to the mighty sire wolf creeping closer. Wolfgang tried see in more detail, but was met with a magician's handshake.

Wolfgang walked forward in a fighting stance, Vernock prowled closer, the clouds parted and a knife in the thing's hand glinted in the moonlight. They all heard Shepherd bark from the road below. The thing glanced down and Vernock shot forward to stop the its escape It jumped off clear away into a back-flip and disappeared below.

Wolfgang yelled down, "coming your way!"

Shepherd was sweeping the bushes with Gerroax as Wolfgang and Vernock found a spot to descend. They could here the two of them moving, and that sound covered the approach of the thing. Gerroax noticed it first and pointed, but was distracted by a rock hitting near by. Shepherd only caught a glimpse as something vaulted past them, tagging the dog with a start. The thing took cover in the bushes on the other side and Shepherd command Gerroax to his side, Wolfgang and Vernock joined, and they waited for movement.

Agent Shepherd, gun trained on the bushes, asked, "do they have a familiar? Mountain lion?"

"I'll be damned if they made a predator a familiar," said Wolfgang. "She's just toying with us."

"Come out with you hands where I can see them," Shepherd barked.

A knife fell nearby with a metal clink, the blade smeared with blood. She stood, eyes reflecting in the dark just above the bush. Out numbered, out sized, and out gunned, it didn't seem bother her at all, like the gun trained on her wasn't even there.

Shepherd said calmly, "you were the one that killed my pilots, August Amorevore," deducing her name from his intel, he emphasized it as though it would give him some power over her. "Well I shot your mother."

Wolfgang eyed him, noting the sadistic intent of insult, but Shepherd remained focused on her, quietly waiting for her to do something, anything, that would justify what came next.

"You caught me, I lose," said the charming voice of young woman, nearly catching them all off guard. There was the slightest rise in her voice, like she stifled a giggle.

Shepherd stayed quiet, Gerroax adjusted a paw in anticipation. It was Wolfgang who spoke up as Vernock lowered it's head and circled closer. "I take her for-"

Agent Shepherd cut him off and lower his weapon to his hip, "no. I'm placing her under arrest we will follow procedure, witch."

"Of course," replied both Wolfgang and August in unison.

Shepherd cuffed August as the dogs took notice of something to the north. Wolfgang had heard a shot go off a moment ago, but wasn't sure what Vernock was looking for just yet.

"We need to get off the road," said August, "some high-schoolers will be coming this way soon. And don't forget my knife," she demanded. Wolfgang obliged, he heard her mutter, "it was a gift from dad."

They began down the road, the police lights were moving about town in the distance, but the many reflective pairs of eyes peaking at them from the grasses that concerned them more. The hoard of cats had evidently spread out, and some were here. When a couple cats came into the road in front of them, Vernock gave a short sharp bark that sent the felines back onto the game trail, which they followed. Wolfgang glanced from the cats to his captive, he didn't ask the question on his lips. In the moonlight they could see her clearly now, they really did need to get her away from civilians. While they might be able to smooth over Wolfgang's more bestial features as an exceptionally ugly and rugged, August was inexplicable.

Introducing August Amorevore.

5'2" but always on her tip toes or all fours, weight kept secret, Age 17. She keeps her hair in a tight bob cut although it can be hard to tell with her fur starting around the neck, covering nearly all her body in black. Her fur is especially fluffy around her calves, forearms, and shoulders. Remaining exposed are only her face, palms, and soles. Her thick and powerful hips are adorned with a tight elastic belt to hold her knife, house keys, and treats for the cats.

Her petite posture and dainty smile belie her elongated rounded neck, exceptionally long arms, and peculiarly hungry eyes.

From the mind of Wolfgang Evenfang, "she's younger than me. I don't get it, her familiarization is so complete and so clean. How could she have progressed that quickly? How many cats did she wring the life out of? Or is it not? Her breαth isn't right, it's too pure, too focused. Is this a Determination? Is that tape on her-"

With her hands tied she took care going up the hill, Shepherd looked back ensure her cooperation and she rebuked him with a sly, "beautiful view, isn't it." He kept them moving. Wolfgang brought up the rear, watching her closely.

"And what's you're name," she asked Vernock, who stayed at her flank. Wolfgang answered and she addressed the sire wolf with baby talk, "well you a good boy aren't you, big boy too."

Vernock did not pull away as she lightly pet the back of his neck, but he did not wag his tail in reply either.

"And don't get any funny ideas back there big guy, I'm a lesbian."

Wolfgang briefly pursed his lips and said, "good for you."

She casually and confidently looked over her shoulder at him as she slipped one hand out of her cuffs with a grin. He stayed quiet and she reinserted her hand in front of her body, for comfort.

It seemed as though it was going to be a long walk back, but just a Shepherd reached for his radio Jake signaled through it.

Both of the men heard the distress in their ears. At the same time August distracted them, "oh! Oh! it's time!" She bounded three steps away into the grass. Shepherd and Gerroax barked, but she was either oblivious or unfazed. She gently pet Vernock and crouched down, staring off into town. Wolfgang knelt behind her with a firm hand on her shoulder, "what are you doing?"

"Can't you seem them," she said with an innocent impunity. "Oh, of course you can't, here."

Both men wore displeased expressions, Shepherd had his hand on his rifle, Wolfgang stayed calm but grabbed her arm before she touched his face.

"Oh don't be like that. You want to see right?"

He looked out over the town, aside from some police lights there was nothing unusual.

August pouted, "he's going to shoot me if I hurt you, just trust me."

Wolfgang could see her breαth, he was no auramancer but every witch should be able to read a little emotion, and with his combat experience he was well trained on looking for fear, anger, and killing intent. He saw none of these, no, her breαth was the same as it was since they caught her, something he could only describe as playful.

He let her have her way, and she circled around and practically laid atop his shoulder, her eyes next to his. She slipped her hands out of the cuffs held them to his temples. He let down is guard She channeled her breαth in him, tuning his pnuema and eyes like a radio or telescope, and said "on the south side of town, coming from the church."

His eyes could see the chaotic swirling patterns in the wiɳd and changes in the domain and the ambient whispɛrs and errant groωls of the land near them, but gradually he focused in on a string of little golden lights floating up to the heavens.

He asked, "they're small, how far away are they."

"It's coming from the church, there's a funeral tonight. Aren't they pretty?"

"There's no way my pnuema reaches, what? One, two miles? Are they lit up? What are they?"

"Pledges, of course."

Wolfgang look are her, somewhat in disbelief, and when he looked back his eyes returned to normal.

Shepherd aloud this to happen, patient for his own reasons, but now he spoke up, "that's enough. We're moving to regroup. And you August should be happy to comply, or else things will only get worse for you and your sisters." As he said this he approached her, replacing the cuffs on her wrists and tightening them until she winced.

She pouted dramatically, "ouch," but smiled as she fell in line.

Once called the Ejaculate of Faith in Latin, by a nameless monk writing frantic notes from within the crisis of the Black Century, the term slowly shifted to pledges of faith or just pledge for more the secular of mages. It was special kind of wδrds, almost a spell unto itself, that every soul periodically excreted from their body along with their natural breαth. Usually requiring equipment to see and far more elusive that any soμnd or spell, pledges seem to float through space unknown to a destination only know in the heart, if not the mind, of the one that made it.

Chapter 5

A bewildered Timothy stumbled over the thick weeds. The man behind him, Agent Jake, was yelling at nothing amid loud crackling sounds. The man in front of him, Leonard West, was proceeding with intention into the area that Amanda had fled. He followed for a moment.

It didn't take long as Leonard weaved around two Rocky Mountain Junipers and said, "there you are."

Timothy's heard a small yelp in response, he rushed to find Amanda kneeling on the ground. A wave of relief washing over his face as he pushed past the older man, and that turned to disgust just as quickly. Amanda was holding something laying on the ground in her arms. It was a woman with deep brown red running stain on her chest. She wore almost nothing, revealing blotches of strange skin and hair, fur even, and rashes of some sickening bruise that seemed to periodically squirm below the skin. Timothy tried to look away, his eyes found several dead cats leading away from them.

"We have to help her," said Amanda, "we have to get her to a hospital."

Leonard said, "oh, she'll be in a hospital," and lurched forward.

Timothy spun around and put up his arms on instinct.

"Woah! Hey, what are you doing," cried Timothy.

"Out of the way, I have to fix this now while she's weak," Leonard tried push the boy aside, but the girl was watching and boy did not relent so easy.

Amanda said, "please help, we need to go."

Timothy shifted his boots in the dust and stood tall, "I don't know what she's done to make you this angry, but this isn't going to fix it. Get a hold of your self."

"You have no idea what you're talking about kid." Leonard's eyes were aflame with burning regrets and billowing resentment. "You have no idea how much damage a woman can do to your life."

The men exchanged some meaningless phrases as Amanda helped the now lucid May to her feet.

Suddenly, Timothy felt a scream wash over him. Felt? Leonard seemed annoyed but unfazed, gazing past him. Timothy turned around and his brain corrected itself, he was hearing a pained cry from the injured woman, so great was her agony that he could almost see it ripple in the air and shine in her eyes. Strangely, even as the woman screamed, stray cats came out the brush to her. Amanda was helping her limp away and Timothy went to help and soothe the women. But just as suddenly as it had begun the scream seemed to move past them and was gone.

Everyone froze, as they could now here another group nearby. They were fighting about which way to go, and yelling about a scream in there ears. Two men, a woman, and two dogs? So much was happening that Timothy could hardly keep up, but in looking to Amanda he noticed one of the stray cats fainting as the sickly woman make a motion with her had. Not a spasm, but a purposeful motion, isolated in its intent.

He have time to think it over as Leonard pushed past him to hoist the woman over his shoulder.

He whispered, "fine. I know where she wants to go. That's where we'll settle this."

Amanda looked for the woman's approval and was content. Timothy followed along.

Moments later they found the road. For reasons that seemed completely coincidental, a large SUV was approaching. A friendly woman, who introduced herself as Regina, immediately helped the four of them inside, and took them into town. Regina had a cat in her front seat that Leonard pushed aside. They saw some of the high-schoolers coming down the way from Stiller's mine on their way.

"Looks like the parties over," said Tim.

Amanda did not respond, nor anyone else. Between the two of them was May West, covered in blood. She seemed to come and go, as if she was drifting off to sleep, yet her yes were at full attention. Occasionally she might whisper something that Amanda seemed to have no trouble hearing, and yet he had yet to hear her voice. Whenever Regina began to asked any question regarding the situation, May would whisper and wave of her hand, the all would smooth over.

"Are you alright," asked Timothy, leaning in front of May, trying to see Amanda.

"I'm fine," she replied.

"What about your cat?"

"It wasn't mine."

"Oh, well what happened to it."

"It doesn't matter now," she said with frustration. She put her hand gently on May's, "this is all that matters."

Soon they arrived at Brakenwald's Veterinarian Clinic, and Amanda helped May inside. Regina, with her cat following, got out, unlocked the door, then assisted them into the depths of the clinic.

Leonard, far calmer now, stood beside Timothy as they watched all this, "you should give up on her, Kid. It's too late for her."

Timothy glared at him, but he didn't reply, maybe he knew Leonard wasn't wrong.

"What's this all about, anyways?" August moved over the terrain with deliberate steps and sudden bursts of prancing.

"Quiet," Shepherd refused to indulge her. He was leading them back the way they had came, to find both the Steward's body and what happened to Jake, who was not answering on the radio. The others responded on check in, but were awaiting further orders. It was dangerous to talk tactics out loud with the domain blanketing all of them. A host of cats had gradually joined them at a distance, darting under the grass and waiting in the night.

August looked back at Wolfgang, "are you seeing this police brutality?" Her theatrics weren't getting a reaction from her captors. "And what about you, big guy? You seem like you'd be better off than a mere working witch."

Wolfgang said, "actually, I'm hear on behalf of Lord Jovian Evenfang. We wanted to ask you some questions about your cats, they've made a stir among the coven."

"Oh, I get it. You want to steal our secrets. Officer! Officer! The Evenfangs want to devour our coven. Won't you protect me?"

Shepherd had stopped moving, "you'll be plenty protected inside of a- cell." He stopped moving, looking at them with a thoughtful deafening silence.

August went quiet after that, maybe she was dejected, perhaps she was satisfied.

Shepherd held an electronic device in his hand, such things were rare in this age after the day the computers screamed. Both Wolfgang and August eyed the flashing lights with curiosity. As they went on the blinking grew more frequent. They reached the area where they'd confronted the Steward, Shepherd began poking around group of Rocky Mountain Junipers. Trying to find the spot, that he'd only seen once in a rush in the dark on unfamiliar terrain and now coming form a different direction, proved difficult.

Suddenly a horrible screaming washed over their skin and into their ears. Shepherd spun around towards August, she seemed in pain too.

He demanded, "what is this?"

"I don't know."

The scream seemed to grow thicker. August seemed to relax ever so slightly as the men grew more irritated. She lifted one of her legs to point deeper into the trees. She spoke in a mock yell as if to overcome the sound, "I think mom's that way."

Agent Shepherd pondered the device in his hand, and trees behind him. He shouted, "this way!"

They left the trees behind in favor of finding Jake. The screaming sensation gradually slid off them.

As the high-schoolers fled back to town they found their the streets still quiet lively. Cat's all over town were yowling and hissing and running about. People were out looking for their escaped kitties and others were out on strange errands under the moonlight.

Upon finding his pilots dead, Senior Field Agent John Shepherd had radioed for backup. An emergency field operation team arrived around the time Shepherd found Junior Field Agent Jake Smith incapacitated, along side his assigned familiar wolf-dog Gerrowce. Jake had æther burning across his scalp, indicating dangerous levels of wiɳd had affected his brain. He was transported by helicopter away for immediate treatment.

"Will he live," Agent Shepherd asked.

"Depends on what he got hit with," Wolfgang said, carrying Gerrowce as they went. The dog was still hanging on, but there was very little they could do to treat him at this time. They met with the Samuel, Chester, and the backup team near the Amorevore's home. Wolfgang brought it to the group's attention, "I think the Steward's still alive."

"I put a hole in her chest," Shepherd replied, incredulous.

They looked to July Amorevore. While captured she had begun growing the density of the domain around her, evidently to distract from the Steward moving farther away, into town. She looked at them with a spiteful satisfaction.

"The domain's core has moved away from us. This one is the fail-safe," Wolfgang said.

Chester, looked toward town, "he's right. I didn't notice. She got me."

August, wrapped in a blanket and still handcuffed, sat down with her sister and under her breath, yet clearly meant to be heard, she said, "cat's have nine lives."

Shepherd looked at her with silent rage. He and his men went out to find Steward May Amorevore's body, they were disappointed. He ordered that they establish a new field base.

July began to protest as the team prepared.

Wolfgang leaned in to Shepherd, "are you sure about this? You're going to hurt her. Doesn't she rights or something?"

Agent Shepherd watched as they loaded the witches into the helicopter, July now hurling expletives at the men. "She had rights and I have probable cause."

Moments later, their original helicopter and SUV were all parked on a dirt access road south in the fields outside of town, beyond the domain. Wolfgang, Chester, and Vernock took turns slowly siphoning and replacing the nastiness that had mixed into Gerrowce's circµlation, but there was nothing they could do about the tissue damage. The wolf-dog had earned itself an early retirement in the scenic Evenfang ranches of the northern forests, although it may yet recover enough to still serve.

August sat with her older sister, July sat bent over in pain. She had been forcibly ripped from the domain, and the circµlatory connections inside of her were likely writhing and bleeding profusely.

Shepherd convened with his men inside of a large box truck. Although muffled, the sound of the radio on the speakers and the way Shepherd stormed out of the van indicated his superior was not pleased with the botched arrest.

Approximately 97% of the ASA's population lives within the boundaries of a witch's domain. Established in the Treaty of Salem and its subsequent addendums, the Grand Old Coven provides magical protection for the country. As time went on, it became obvious just how much leverage and power such a position bestowed, even without direct abuse and overt corruption. The average citizen had no idea magic existed, and those with suspicions still lacked means. A Steward could effectively hold an entire town hostage with an invisible gun that could appear anywhere at anytime at the witch's discretion.

This was the exact situation the GLO wanted to avoid.

"What's the plan," asked Wolfgang.

"Dmitri hasn't answered, you wouldn't know anything about that would you?"

"No."

"I'm taking a team to retrieve him. You three are staying here to watch the Amorevore."

Samuel had no qualms with this. Chester had nothing to say. Wolfgang replied, "I should be with you to get my man."

"This is no longer a joint operation. We have citizens in danger and this isn't you're territory. I'm in command." Shepherd waited for a response.

Wolfgang stood tall and unfazed.

August, wrapped in blanket, called out from behind them, "are you going to let him talk to you like that, big guy?!"

Wolfgang looked over his shoulder, annoyed. "You're right. I should be here to watch them. Good hunting."

Shepherd seems satisfied and ordered Gerroax to stay for the time being. The dog was happy to stay near the others, he waited attentively while watching the camp.

Chapter 6

In the back room of the veterinarian clinic, May Amorevore dismissed the young Amanda, so that she might tend to her wounds. The building was quiet, save for the now disturbed animals being held over night, some dogs, mostly cats pacing in their kennels. May West's daughter, June West, June West was rather beloved among the town's cat owners, she had way of soothing their poor sick feline companions that made visits a pleasant matter. Regina, coworker and good friend to June, was happy to let May use the facility while she caught up on work in the office.

Amanda and Timothy waited in the front, as a hiss turned to a yowl from the back room. Leonard West took that as his queue. He found his ex-wife, holding up a disquieted cat, struggling impotently. The other cats in the cages seemed to sway and meow with May Amorevore, before she placed her mouth around the cat's and inhaled. She left the lifeless animal on the table as she cleaned the blood from the tender red flesh around her bullet wound.

"How could you," said Leonard, unsurprised by what was in front of him.

"I asked you to come," said May, as though she'd done nothing wrong.

"You don't get to make demands anymore, May. How could just kill Deeno like that."

"I'm the mother of your daughters, you have a responsibility to them. I did what I had to to get you to protect your children."

"From what, some mess you got yourself into with the glowies? So what is it?" What did you need so badly that my dog had to die?"

May gave him a look, a horrifying and confident look. "I needed a ride, but Regina got there first. You always had great timing, Leonard."

That pushed the man over the edge. His right leg started to shake, as did his voice. "I loved you, I gave everything to raise those girls. You've taken our house, you turned my daughters against me, people around town look at me like I'm trash. Isn't that enough? What did Deeno do?!" He softly punched the table, unable to muster any force.

May, peeled off he blood stained scanty witch's dress, and dug around for a spare set of scrubs. "You pushed your daughters away yourself, being the obnoxious the way you are. And how could you complain about providing for them? What's more important, that dog or you own flesh and blood?"

Leonard walked out.

Timothy said, "hey, let's get out of here."

Amanda looked at him gravely, "how could you even say that?"

"This is weird, let's call 9-1-1 for her and I'll walk you home."

"We can't leave her with that man, can't you think about someone other than yourself?"

Timothy stared for a long moment, too long and so he sat back and eyed the door. "I thought you wanted to have fun tonight."

"I never said that."

Timothy put his hands in his pockets and sat quietly.

As Leonard rounded the corner Amanda got up and went to the back. The man sat down heavily, with a sulking plop as though he might not get back up again.

Timothy looked his way, he could see Leonard's eyes were staring straight through the floor to some far off vista he'd never reach.

The man said, "let me tell you something, kid. If I could go back, if I could do it all over, I'd never get get married and I'd never have kids."

"Is it that bad?"

"You have no idea."

"Well, you did the right thing at least. I hope you can figure things out," Timothy said, trying to sound positive with words that really weren't his own.

Leonard turned to looked at him with a desperate hunger, "you don't get it. That woman's destroyed my life. If a man did half what she's done I'd- " He looked away, "women do it slower is all."

Timothy had nothing else to say, he tapped his boots a couple times.

There was a clatter in the back and Timothy gladly took it a signal to leave Leonard alone. He took a deep breath and entered the room. He found Amanda reaching toward a cat perched atop a tall cabinet in the corner, a pile paper and bottles scattered around her. "Tim, help me."

He came and he might have been able to reach, but Amanda was in the way. Before he could to reconsider and speak, a hand pressed him forward, cushioned by Amanda against the cabinet. She was soft, and warm, and her hair smelled like strawberries.

Timothy's eyes dilated as May West got on a stool and reached over them to take the cat into her arms. May brushed up against his neck as she descended, he felt the cat's fur, and her hand his shoulder.

"You're such a gentleman," said the older woman, taking the cat to the table.

His nostrils clamped shut at the fetid smell of May's breath.

"Thank you," said Amanda demurely, as she nudged him back towards the door.

"I'll be done soon," said May.

"Okay," said Tim. He left dazed before coming to his senses. He turned to find Amanda closing the door, he caught just a glimpse of May holding up the cat and bringing it to her mouth.

Dmitri watched June slowly awake in the dark. He could see the outline of her breαth over her shadow, and shine of her eye's as her pnuema strengthened and looked at him, he could make out traces of her hair where the mine shaft wiɳd slowly drifted outward. He gave her a moment to gather herself, even sleeping powder as

well made as his had some lingering haze to it. She took a deep breath and sighed, and he took that as the que for his monologue.

"I have studied my whole life, I've made myself useful. And yet, the Evenfang hold me down, they stop me from rising higher. I spend all day purifying ingredients so people can have slightly better headache relief, or treatments for things that wouldn't be a problem if Americans weren't so ravenously unhealthy. If I don't find something to make my own soon, I might just undergo magi-pause, and then I'll be stuck as an alchemist huffing fumes for the rest of my life."

Dmitri shifted over the old metal drum he was sitting on and knelt down, getting closer, she leaned up against the rock wall. "So, I need you, Miss Amorevore, to tell me your secrets. It won't hurt you, and it will help me. Then I'll help you. I like your cats, you coven sent two to my mother, I kept one. I need more."

June asked flatly, "where are we?"

"A little ways inside the mine, outside the domain."

She perked up, but seemed to have a different thought over take her, "wait, did you quell the eɕho?"

Dmitri scoffed, "eɕho? That was a melδdy at best, it didn't have enough mass to be an eɕho."

June hesitated, then said affably, "that's because the mine shaft is its territory, the visage of the dead boy is just a limb. We need to leave." She stood up, and looked at him meekly, "as long as mother doesn't find out, I'll help you."

They got up to leave, Dmitri went left and June went right.

"Where are you going," he asked.

"Upward," she said.

"Oh, actually, were just above a little dip in the path, we have to go down then up around the corner."

They continued, clinging to the wall even with their magic vision the dark was still consuming, with nothing but the sound of errant pebbles clunching and clickering as they went.

Dmitri said under his breath, "my belt is heavy." referring to his gear, potions, and cloak, less gear that he'd take on a casual hike.

A slight glow of moonlight was filling the passage, yet Jun said with a fear in her voice, "are we supposed to still be going down?"

They both stopped, each examined the other's breαth for signs for betrayal, not that either could be confident in the assessment, yet the longer the moment wore on the more suspicion grew.

She silently felt herself in the dark, probing to see if anything was wrong. "How long was I out?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes. Now come on, we're almost there." Dmitri took a step forward and his foot slipped, sending him down and into the wall.

June took a step and slipped forward, nearly falling backward down the slope. "Oh no."

"Are you sure this is the way?!"

"Yes," Dmitri said, agitated.

"It's the eɕho. I couldn't resist in my sleep." June began to run ahead, up the hill and leaning backward. "Take off your clothes and run!"

Then in dawned on him, "our gravity vectors?" Dmitri looking backward into the darkness and saw the face of young man and a pale hand beckoning him downward. Dmitri unfastened his belt and left it behind, with all his potions and sidearm. His cloak fell away, drifting quickly down the passage into the black. He took two steps and stumbled again and his boots suddenly felt like concrete blocks. He had his guard down. While his flesh was protected, the eɕho had been slowly increasing the gravity vector of all his equipment. He quickly began fighting to get rid of his boots and scrambled up the passage, in his underwear.

June's flesh had been changed, but in the opposite way, as Dmitri caught up. He could see her standing at an impossible angle, her expression between sickness and confusion.

Then he heard the sound of a helicopter outside and search lights strafing through the entrance. He grabbed her arm and held her back just before the final bend.

The chopper kicked up dust, sticks, and some trash the high-schoolers had left behind. Agent Shepherd and another man in lighter gear descended a rope latter. Werloax stamped back and forth anxiously at the mine entrance, along side June's flying broom. Shepherd followed the beeping of his device to Dmitri's discarded communications equipment, then approached.

"Werloax, come," he commanded, but the wolf only retreated closer to the mine.

Shepherd approached and picked up June's broom. He yelled into the mine, "Dmitri! The law still applies to inter-coven disputes. Come out with our target, otherwise I will have to treat this as a case of interference and kidnapping."

June was squirming Her breathing was frantic as she tried to reassert control through her circµlation like a proper witch. However, Dmitri was squeezing her arm saying, "keep quiet," which did not help her concentration. She did keep quiet, maybe because she was order, perhaps because that was all she could do.

Shepherd called again from above, Werloax staying at the entrance to the mine.

Dmitri, also panicked, demanded, "What is it? what's the secret of your cats Amorevore. They're not even all that useful, yet they're- What is it! What's the core of your spell work? I'll figure out the rest."

June squeak, "I'll tell you, I promise. I just-"

Unbeknownst to either, Shepherd had pulled out a laminated quick reference field map, they were currently outside the domain. With a satisfied smile underneath his goggles, he called again into the mine, "June Amorevore! We have your mother and sisters captive. Resisting arrest will only make things worse for you."

Dmitri could see a stark change in June's breαth. He hissed, "don't you dare betray me!"

She jerked her arm free, and yelled "let me think!" Stumbling backwards into view, there was no more hiding. Her body was pulled upward, so she ran up the shaft.

Dmitri gave chase. Werloax locked onto the woman briefly, but then Dmitri gasped as he fell, clutching at his underwear around his knees.

June called out, "help, I need my broom!"

The other man readied his rifle, but Shepherd readied a set of hand cuffs. As June reach for her broom he locked himself to her. She did not resist, only activate the enchantment of the broom and twisted and turned awkwardly using it to ground herself.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'll listen. Don't make mother angry mother, don't-"

Shepherd had calm her down and drag her along as he got a better view of the mine. "Dmitri! Why are you naked with a woman while on mission?" He asked this while fighting back the mocking tone in his voice, because through his goggles he knew full well that there was some strange coalescence of wiɳd behind the struggling naked witch on the ground.

Dmitri flew into a tantrum, yelling out a mixture of of explanations and indignant demands, all while covering himself. Shepherd said something too quiet to be heard and turning away. Soon the sound of the helicopter intensified then faded.

Werloax took Dmitri's arm and tried to pull him toward the exit. The man chastised him. "Stop. I don't need help, I need everyone out of my way. I've studied, I've practiced. A single eϛho is nothing. Where are my shorts?"

Dmitri went deeper, looking to recover his gear. The visage of the boy manifested before him and beckoned him further. The witch pushes through and scattered the illusion. Werloax began to vocalize, calling his master to reason.

"Shut up! I won't let this beat me, I won't let them laugh at me, I'm better than this!"

Dmitri found his boots, shorts, and belt, but he could not lift them. They'd become as heavy as stone. His awkward grip slipped and he fell into the wall. The boy beckoned him again, Dmitri dispersed it again. He tried to lift his things and a rock fell on his head, he stood up to find the boy again, and he dispersed if again in a rage. Werloax continued to cry.

"Shut up!"

Dmitri forsook his gear and boots, he just wanted his shorts. He couldn't budge it. He looked at the black walls around him and he saw the boy's face no matter what direction he turned. He lashed out, casting a haphazard wδrds each wall and the ceiling at a dangerous pace.

He left himself panting for air. The eϛho had limited energy as did he. "I can handle this," he slowly said. However, as he stood up he did so slowly, very slowly. His expression changed, and his eyes darted all around. He'd exhausted himself and lost concentration on his counter-magic breαth.

He began to walk, to climb, to scramble, "no, no. No!"

Werloax ran out of the mine and into the moon light, with ten pairs of reflective eyes watching him from the shadows all around. He didn't know what to do. Then Dmitri called out, "Werloax! Help!" He turned back around, staring into the black. He paced back and forth once. He huffed. Werloax went down, he found his master in a frantic state. Werloax hoωled, he projected his breαth onto his master, and by right of their contract, he pulled Dmitri's into himself. He licked Dmitri's face, who protested but their cycling of breαth grew stronger, and gradually Werloax filtered out the unwelcome wiɳd and Dmitri's own breαth became more stable.

Chapter 7

Chester let out a heavy sigh.

"Do one for me, would ya," asked Wolfgang.

Chester let out a longer heavier sigh as they stood watch nearby the Amorevore sisters at the GLO's new operations camp.

"That's about right. How are you holding up?"

Chester bent over to pet Buster, "I'm feeling better, oddly enough."

Wolfgang scratched his chin and behind Vernock's ears, "yeah, the anticipation is the worst. Best to focus on what's in front of you."

"What are you thinking about this?"

They shared a look, both uneasy about who might be listening, but Wolfgang said aloud, "I'm wondering why uncle told me to do thing officially. I could have drove down here for a weekend, did some visiting, and everything would have been fine."

Chester stood up and leaned in, with eye on the July and August, "they're all going into custody aren't they?"

"Yep."

"And the house is a crime scene?"

"Yep."

"So what, are you going to stay here as a consultant until it's done?"

"I would hate that, but more importantly, it would depend on Shepherd recommending it to his superiors, but..."

"They're going to use their investigator."

"Yep."

"Aunt Jasmine wants the cats."

"Aunt Jasmine wants those cats."

"Do we have any exits?"

Wolfgang looked around, he saw empty vehicles and two cat witches bound and ready to be hauled off. He saw a stretch of road connecting to the interstate highway. He saw bureaucrats, lies, and trouble. He said, "Uncle Jovian can clean up our mess, but it has to be the right kind of mess. We wait."

Agent Samuel and Uuwowce came over with July's confiscated broomstick. He asked, "can anyone ride one of these?"

Chester said, "afraid not, it works by- " and broke into a short explanation of enchantment, which transitioned to testing what type the broom was using, which escalated to the men deciding that Chester and Wolfgang needed to engage in a balancing competition, standing upright on the broom. Samuel officiated, but the results were inconclusive. Chester didn't last long and Wolfgang's high center of gravity gave way to a violent swinging. July chastised them about damaging it as August giggled.

"I swear, if we were still at the house," July seethed. Even without the domain, she was still dangerous. She could try to cast a spell sitting there, but it would at least emit from her person in some way.

"Watch it," said Samuel approaching. "We've got all the evidence we need to put you away for life. But we can't stick a witch in a normal prison, so maybe I'll put a collar on your neck put you to work."

"I hate you, you pathetic scum. How dare you talk to me that way. If none of your business how we do our job, we work under the moon so you can sleep in your bed. You can't even see the whispɛrs jibbering at your feet."

Samuel tapped the goggles hanging around his neck, "not yet, but our technology is getting better all the time. When this is done I think I'll get a new pair of eyes. I'll keep getting upgrades, I'll keep getting promotions, I'll be on top of the world, and you'll be a thing of the past."

"You'll never burn us all."

"Why would I do that? I don't need to."

"Why are you here, anyway?" July's voice was growing strained. "You had no right to assault us!"

"You've had some missing persons in the past couple years and you didn't file any paperwork."

July's face dropped, "that's it? paperwork?"

Samuel grinned, "you know they got Al Capone on taxes way back when."

For the next few minutes August worked on cheering up July, mainly through a lot of snuggling and rubbing her head against her older sister's arm. The men were nearby, and a whole assortment of staff in various vans beyond. They tried to talk in hushed voices yet that only invited more intrusion from their guards.

"Stop, August, I'm fine. Thank you."

The younger rested her on head on the older's shoulder and sighed. "The funeral was pretty, did you see it, Jewels?"

"I was being dragged through the dirt-"

August cut her off dramatically, keeping her sister from falling into another bout of seething rage. "Oh! Oh, Oh! How I want it. I want love like that Jewels, I want pure love with no interference, no one else, no distractions, and no gods to get in the way. I want their pledge for me and mine for them!"

"You're such a romantic, sis."

August purred and cooed into her shoulder, "wouldn't it be beautiful?"

July smiled.

Wolfgang returned with cups in his arms, setting some down for the dogs, passing one off to Chester, he continue to the Amorevore. July's face still had dried blood on it.

"I got you some warm coffee and wet towel."

July begrudgingly accepted, cleaned herself with cuffed hands.

August took both drinks, letting the blanket covering her to droop, revealing more of her fur covered body. "Do you think this would be enough to get me to reveal my secrets? Here in front of everyone?"

"I wouldn't respect you if you did." Wolfgang knelt down, with his massive size still meeting the women's eyes. He said, "our goal wasn't to destroy your coven. My Aunt, wife of the head of the whole big Evenfang coven, really liked the cat you sent her."

July hissed, "don't come over here and-"

August nudged her.

Wolfgang watched their breαth. July was more fearful than angry, although she was that too. August, however, was still steadily playful, perhaps growing more predatory.

He asked, "do you have an explanation for what we found in the basement?"

August sipped her drink.

He asked, "should I be worried about all these cats, or have you been working through trial and error?"

August handed a cup to July. She was also watching his breαth closely. She said, "a Lady has to have her secrets."

Vernock finished inspecting their perimeter, the wolven eyes in it's human-like face ever keen on staying aware of the landscape. He came to sit next to Wolfgang. The man said, "You have me on watch, you have the glowies coming to shut you down, you sisters are arrested, and your mom is going to be hunted too. Tell me, what outcome do you want here?"

August watched him, he spoke in foreboding statements, but his breαth was not one of threats. She said, "A cat can't live on a leash."

He replied, "that doesn't mean you're going to fight to the death, are you?"

She sipped her drink.

Wolfgang stood. The town was still active, even at this hour. People were driving around, emergency lights were flashing. The breeze licked over the field, the eyes of a hundred cats were peering at the camp from the shadows.

"What dark arts has your mother gotten you into? I might be able to stay standing after a twenty-two or nine millimeter with some adrenaline in my system, but I watched your tiny mom take a five five six, to the chest, and she's still kicking. That's monstrous."

He waited, but the Amorevore said nothing. He said, "your not giving me anything to work with here."

He was about to give them space, when August spoke. "Mother's magnum opus." July tried to shush her, but she had gotten his attention. She sipped her drink. "We were working on mother's magnum opus. That's what we want."

Wolfgang waited but August wasn't going to say anymore. He said, "a wolf can't live on a leash either," and turned to leave.

August snickered to herself. She leaned in toward July, "sometimes boys aren't so bad."

Wolfgang swiftly bent down to scoop up a cat that was passing through towards the Amorevore. He carried it in one arm, Vernock sniffed it, then gently picked up by the nape of its neck and walked it back to the grasses.

Wolfgang said to Chester, "we wait."

A moment passed and he signaled to Vernock. The sire wolf trotted over to July and August, who acted happy to see him, before he lifted a leg and pissed on theirs. July was predictably agitated, but it was seeing August finally act like she wasn't in control that made Wolfgang chuckle. Chester signaled to Buster Verloam, who nodded to Vernock. The sire wolf murmured a low tone, and both Uuwowce near Samuel and Gerroax, currently waiting for Shepherd, acknowledged the marking.

Timothy had enough. He hopped up from the bench and went towards the back of the clinic one last time. He slid past Regina, who was still looking over various pieces of paper while May used their facility to treat her own gunshot wound, all while acting like nothing was wrong. Timothy shook his head stayed on task. He popped his head into the backroom, "hey, I'm going to set out for home, my parents are-"

The boy trailed off. Amanda sat with one cat in her arms, saying back and forth. Her hair was in disarray, the room smelled awful. May stood hunched over the table, breathing heavily, with some kind of thick red sludge on her scrubs. It didn't look like a splatter, rather it was oozing out from underneath. For moment it seemed his eyes deceived him, the sludge was moving on its own. Surely it was just her breathing. He look away and found yet another terrible site, a pile of lifeless cats on the other table, the kennels were now nearly empty.

May looked at him, not a shred of kindness in her eyes. "They're sleeping," she said flatly.

Timothy knelt before Amanda, "is this your cat?"

"No."

"Are your tired?"

"Yeah."

"We're not done just yet," said May.

Timothy paused and asked his would be companion, "okay, so do you want to meet up tomorrow?

Again the older woman interrupted, "I'm sure she'll let you know."

Amanda yawned and clung the kitty in her arms. "I'm fine, good night, Tim." She seemed completely unbothered by his presence or absence.

Timothy came to the waiting room, evidently with a look of horror on his face because Leonard's fire lit once more. The boy drifted towards the door, while the man slapped his knees and marched back to confront his ex-wife. Timothy heard shouting that ended abruptly. Leonard came stumbling back, falling to his knees and vomiting. Regina appeared from the office and began fussing about the mess and Leonard stood once more, takes heavy yet cautious breaths through his mouth defiled. For the briefest moment it looked as through he might turn and try again by the slightest hint of his shoulders and feet. However, a wave of further nausea seemed to strike him, shoving him into a stupor towards the door. He exited the veterinarian clinic. After one last haunted look at the disquieting scene he was leaving, Timothy followed to find the older man on his knees again.

Leonard pounded his fist on pavement, his knuckles immediately bloodied by pebbles and fragments. "There's nothing I can do," he said it as though he'd said a thousand time before, a mantra of despair.

Timothy had a void in his mind where his understanding of the world and women was just hours before. In this moment it was filled with this image of Leonard. The boy left the man there. There was nothing he could do.

That evening all throughout Eden's Creak, the adults knew it was spring break. They knew some adolescent mischief may happen in the night. There was a funeral at the church, and a small band was playing near the fountain in the center of town. The music might go on a little too late, the kids might be a little too rowdy, but otherwise it was a normal night. And then, right after the Spring sun set, the cat's began to stir. No

one person could see it, not at first, but an imperceptible wave of agitation seemed to wash over the feline's of the town. Running, panic, yowling and screeching, clawing at the front door, and bizarre aggression began in most homes across the town. An old woman was startled and fell over, that was the first emergency call that night. A small house fire was the second.

A catastrophe of mass inconvenience gripped then night until it changed as suddenly as it started. Again an imperceptible notion seemed to come over the cat's of Eden's Creek. To every owner's further dismay, all the cats ran through the town and disappeared into the alleys, and bushes, and shadows. No one person could see the pattern, but the cats were all gathering in a hidden ring around Brakenwald's Veterinarian Clinic.

"We're close," said May to her daughters in the kitchen of their home. "three days from now we'll harvest. Here is what I need from each of you." She laid out their plans, preparing their supply for the day, unaware that by luck or by fate that a task force of the GLO and Evenfang would be arriving to interrupt them.

May Amorevore finished explaining, "this is our magnum ops, it's more important than our lives."

The youngest daughter was August, who was known about town as having comedown with a horrible illness at a very young age and had to be home schooled and sequestered for care. It was noted that her older sisters also seemed to suffer from illness more often than normal, but she had it the worst. She returned to a nook she had on the side of the home where she listened to plays on the radio and mingled with the cats lazing about the area. She stretched and rolled, day dreaming with hungry look in her eye.

The middle child, July, was a veterinarian assistant. Considering the boom in cat ownership over the years, many had come to know her as cat whisperer making every visit to the clinic a breeze. She left the home on a long walk back to her house, she found her husband, one of the Amorevore's inducted assistants, asleep. She sigh with relief at this.

The oldest child, June, was a nursing assistant. She had earned a quiet reputation among people who visited for regular care as being rather sweet with her words, if a little rough with a needle. After hearing the plan she pulled a small organizer from her purse and look over a calendar, packed with information about a dense schedule.

"But Mom, what about-"

May let out a sigh that cut more like a growl, "June, do you see how hard I'm working? Could think about me for once? Don't disappoint me like this."

June left it at that.

Agent Shepherd secured himself with a safety tether in the helicopter, and with one arm cuffed to June Amorevore he strapped her into the seat and them himself. They set off back towards town. He instructed the pilot to get them straight back to camp, but to climb to an excessive elevation. He asked his captured witch a few questions about what happened to Dmitri, all the while another operative sat with a gun ready if she tried anything.

June was still clutching her broom, looking a tad unsteady even sitting. Her breαth swelled.

"Hey, watch it," said Shepherd, monitoring her through his goggles. The other man shifting slightly.

"Sorry, I'm just trying to regulate myself again, I feel sick."

"You can wait till we're grounded, kill the magic."

June complied and suffered quietly.

Then the pilot began to descend as they approached camp, in this moment he made the mistake of clipping the corner of the domain's bubbly structure, submerging them. He couldn't have know.

June noticed, and so did her mother. "There you are," the voice occurred in June's ear, with no one aboard any the wiser.

The witch covered her mouth, a scared look on her face, her breɑth had receded almost entirely to normal ambient levels. Shepherd shifted his feet preparing for vomit. They were nearly at camp, and she looked more and more intense.

"Hey, don't-"

June wretched backwards and unleashed a spell from her mouth, one that she'd built up in her lungs. A squirming cloud of little squeaking nodules tied together by the tails bloomed from her throat in a brown sickly haze. Both of the men recoiled and shouted. As they did the nodules ran towards their mouths. The pilot reacted as well, and the cloud grew and split apart, each squeaking ball of magic chittering towards the loudest sound it could find, at least those that stood out from the ever present thrum of the chopper.

The men fell into a quick disarray. The pilot focused on steadying them. Shepherd made a quick decision to open the helicopter door, hoping the wiɳd might help diffuse the problem and electric sparks crackling off both him and his back up. He undid his seat belt in the process. All it took was momentary panic, and June Amorevore made he escape attempt, bailing out the helicopter clinging to her flying broomstick.

Shepherd saw the look in her eyes as she did it, a look of fear not thrill, as though she was more afraid of whatever it was compelling her to jump than the fall. Then his wrist was yanked. He and June were still cuffed together.

June had dived downward, but as her arm jerked backwards, she put all she had into her broom. Her body spun around as Shepherd fell from above her, and he weight slammed against her wrist. She cried out immediately as her thumb dislocated and the outer layer of skin was sheared away. Shepherd fell and his safety tether went taught, snapping him into an arc motion, just bellow her. She slammed into the helicopter, but she was free. She looked out across the town, reckoning on the veterinarian clinic, all she had to do was glide forward.

However, she wasn't gliding forward, she was tilting. Maybe it was the rough exit, perhaps it was her gravity vector's instability, or possibly it was a life time of studying magic and not acrobatics, whatever the reason, June had fallen off her broom, and only noticed in time for her leg to kick in desperation and send it falling away from her.

June plummeted to the ground below, her broom just out of reach.

Chapter 8

"Can I have my knife back," August shouted.

Everyone gave her a side eye, even the glowies with their goggles and sunglasses noticeably tilted their heads in disbelief of such a request. Wolfgang walked closer, as nonchalant as possible. He tapped the knife in his belt pocket and said quietly, "I need you to be patient."

As July sneered at him, August stayed quiet. He left. Everyone returned to waiting for the helicopter above.

Chester was adjusting his kit and giving Buster Verloam some affection. He checked his side arm, stretched, and reinvigorated his counter-magic breath. He said, "it's actually pretty exciting once you get past the danger."

Wolfgang said, "from worried to thrill seeking that quick? You're going to love working with me and dad."

"How long do you have Vernock," Chester asked.

"I'll have him for six months. I'm supposed to give him three years."

"Oof, that's a steep price."

"It's not like I'm going to live that long anyways," Wolfgang said. He looked at the two teeth on his bracelet, "I think uncle will be give me another familiar for my birthday. I have to make it count this time."

Chester offered him some jerky with one hand, while feeding some to Buster with the other.

Wolfgang tore into it, passing a piece to Vernock. "We're all going to make it out of here safe, this time. Just have to wait for the right opportunity."

August was snuggling and petting her older sister with sickening affection. All the people guarding them began to look away, no one noticed their conversation. They did notice that more cats had accrued in the grasses near by. The sound of sirens started up again in town, the thrum of the helicopter was getting closer.

"We have no other way of knowing what mom wants," said August. "We know for sure she wants to finish the work."

July had a grim look on her face.

"But I don't want to," August continued. "I don't want to do this to you. I can't decide."

July looked up and away, off towards the hills where their home was.

"We could leave, let's get June and go with these guys. We'll still finish one day."

"No, anything but that." July snapped to focus.

"Why? They'll give us what we need."

"No, no I refuse. Looks at them, how dare they come here."

"Are you sure, it could be nice, don't you want to?"

July's face was conflicted, her mind was fighting itself. She grimaced as some of the dried blood on her face cracked away. Her anger fought back her fear. "Sis, I want you to listen to me. Do it and run like the wind."

August suddenly looked down, a tiny grin in the corners of her lips, she concealed it under a bigger smile. "Oh sis, you don't have to treat me that way. I old enough to look after myself, I could finish alone eventually."

"I'm still your big sister, and our mother wants the work completed. It's more important than our lives. Let me do this."

August didn't let the warm and loving smile leave her face. She buried her head in July's bosom until she could let it fade. The helicopter was getting closer. "Alright, sis. Tell me when."

There was a sudden uproar as the helicopter came in, a woman screamed, falling to her death. It was dark, no one had a clear picture of what was happening. A body landed near by with a heavy thud in the field and someone yelled, "it's the witch!" The messages was echoed by staff all around as the sound of the helicopter drowned everything. As Wolfgang heard the news he snapped out of distraction.

He turned back the captive witches. July was lying down, August was gone.

All around them cats began to screech and growl and flood the camp. Wolfgang signaled to Chester to watch July and began running. Vernock shot out from a bush, his massive form a frightening shadow all on it's own. Gerroax fell in behind, and the dogs lead the way by the scent of Vernock's urine.

There was panic around the camp as cat's assaulted everyone around. They caught scant glimpses of a large shadow running here and there among the cats, and it soon became clear where she was going, to June's body. With people fighting cats, flashlights waving all around, it took a moment to narrow in, but when August sprung out of the grasses and began sprinting up right with a broomstick in hand, the dogs followed.

Wolfgang was held up for just a moment as he crossed to where August had been, he looked over the last ambient scraps of breαth radiating from June Amorevore's corpse. He looked at her bloodied empty eye sockets.

Vernock and Gerroax flanked her on either side, Wolfgang catching up. She tried to jump into the air, but Vernock lept and put and end to plan. August tumbled down but landed on her feet.

"It's three to one. Give up," Wolfgang said.

"My sister is dead, I need to go see my mother," August said, her gaze cast forlorn upon the ground.

"Come back with me now, I'll get the rest of you out of here. Don't ruin it now. Come here, hand me that broom."

August approached slowly, eyes still downcast. "You'll take care of me?"

"Yes," Wolfgang said, his hand out stretched to grab hold.

She set the broom handle in his hand, and hand on his abdomen, and look into his eyes, "for a while now, I've been wondering if I'm actually bisexual, big guy."

"What."

Wolfgang didn't move a muscle. So powerful was his reaction that Vernock also stood up from his hunting stance to wonder at what had blindsided his master.

Then Chester yelled for help over the radio providing a split second distraction. August pulled her knife from Wolfgang's belt and planted one foot on his belt buckle and abdomen before running and jumping off his face into a back-flip that cleared the dogs. Wolfgang tired to grab her but missed. She took off.

He commanded the dogs, "capture, no kill."

Vernock and Gerroax followed August Amorevore, Wolfgang turned back to clean up the mess here.

"Hey, are you alright?" Chester rushed towards July Amorevore. She let out an anguished vibrato screech ash er breαth swelled. All around the grasses shuttered and the camp came to life with the frantic pitter-patter of cats that soon gave way to claws and confusion. Chester stayed focused, Buster watched him, barking and deterring any feline that tried to get close to him as everyone else was being mounted and assaulted by cats. Samuel and Uuwowce were able to hold them off, but not enough to fully help the others.

July was climbing back to her feet, Chester called out to her again. A nearby agent of the GLO ripped a cat off of himself and flung it through the air into the night. He began rushing to apprehend July. Chester yelled for him to stop, but he didn't listen. July formed wδrds in her hands, cats brought her whispεrs. She twisted and jerked in the man's grip, when he did not relent she slammed a ramshackle spell into his side. The agent's defensive tattoo went off, a momentary flash of pain distracted him and three cats launched from the dark, climbing and scratching him in a frenzy.

July stood and opened her eyes, Chester witnessed her empty sockets, and the bloody fluids draining down her face.

He said, "stop, let me help-"

She cried, "screw you," and slammed her forehead into his chest.

Chester backed away, his chests was fizzling where his counter-magic breαth jammed up some sticky haphazard wδrds. He pull it apart with ease.

He watched July, heaving and looking back and forth across panicking camp with eyes that were no longer there. Samuel joined him, rifle in hand, "if I put her down these cats will stop," he said as half a question and half a declaration.

Chester caught him in time, "no! We're outside the domain, the cats are acting on their own."

July formed the wδrds with one hand while the Amorevore cats brought her whispεrs from the area to the other. She felt the whispεrs with the breαth of her hand, not nearly as precise as her eyes would have been, but in this way the blind witch with her many feline allies could rapidly build a wild spell. Although techniques, circumstances, and skill played a role, a witch might take thirty seconds to form one of their own wδrdss, skilled spell casters managing multiple at a time. However, July Amorevore was injured, angry, hateful, and reacting to a darkness she had never known. Her breαth was pungent, circμlation of pain and panic swelling

through the skin. What hideous cat magic had she dedicated herself to, and how rancorous would it be in this state, Chester could not possibly know.

He said, "We don't want to hurt you. Just stop, please."

July looked in his direction, a caustic bubbling circμlation spilling into fuming breαth from her eye sockets. She said calmly, "You'll hurt me, you'll take my pride as a witch."

"I won't hurt you, you can work for us, we'll keep you safe." Chester tried to move closer. He was following his training, maintaining his counter-magic breαth staying in control. Yet, there was pleading in his words, a last attempt for emotion to reverse what a gun powder and lead would resolve.

"You'll lock me up. You don't car," she said with elevating anger, still forming something in her hand that was nearly complete.

Chester grabbed hold of her hand before she conjugated a whispɛrs that would finish the spell's trio. "Please stop, trust me," he said.

July paused, for all the protesting and fury there was softness in her will. All she had to do was stop. "after how far I've come," she said with a growing rage, "Mother would laugh at me. You're a liar, you're a weak little working witch, a dog of the government, you're not man enough to help anyone!"

Buster realized before Chester and tried to bite July's calf, but she already a fuming mδan that sludged onto Chester's hand where he held her. He did not panic, he calmly reached for the spell. But then, with every split second, he watched as his hand drew closer and the mδan sunk through his counter-magic breαth and under his skin. He clutched and his own wrist and stepped back in disbelief. July Kicked Buster aways as the cats swarmed them. She regained balance and began to conjugate another spell. Chester moved to stop her when his flesh and instinct wrestled control from him. He fell the ground, heaving, retching, and vomiting.

Agent Shepherd's Helicopter landed nearby to find everyone fighting off a horde of insidious cats. Agent Samuel was mitigating what damage he could, just barely managing the chaos with Uuwowce's help.

Shepherd began shouting orders. Knives were drawn, and number of problems decreased. Samuel turned to find Chester on the ground. He sent Uuwowce at July, who struck at her legs splendidly. Buster and Uuwowce made short work of the surrounding cats, striking fear into their hearts and sending them back to the grasses. Yet they still screeched and yowled as July continued working from the ground.

The dogs readied to tear at her, but Chester slapped his hand on the ground and called back Buster through puke choked gasps.

Samuel lifted him up, "quit trying to talk to her. The only thing these people understand is power. You have to put her in her place, assert control."

Chester wiped himself off, the grimace on his face showing was far from recovered.

"You're the witch, do something or I'm going to put a bullet in her." Samuel stood Chester up and went to wrestle July's arms, the only thing he could do to help. July had bought herself time and was working with abandon.

Chester readied himself and moved in. He set Buster to hoωls to help him diffuse July's spell before she cast it, and Uuwowce to address the cats waiting for opportunity. He knelt down to grab hold of the spell work July held in her mouth, but he hesitated, long enough that Samuel looked up at him.

Chester clenched his fist and punched July in the side, "stop!"

She didn't quit. She thrashed as she sucked the spell directly into her lungs. Her breαth was thick and clinging to her. Through the physical pain she fought like mad to maintain concentration.

Suddenly Agent Shepherd stood over them. He said coldly, "July Amorevore, I ordered to stop this dangerous act of magic."

Her back arched, her chest swelled, she was ready to burst. She whispered breathlessly, holding everything in such that Chester only heard because he watched her lips. She said, "Laugh: Sour Dancing Jellicle."

Shepherd said, "you have broken the law," and fired once with his side arm, directly into her heart.

Samuel and Chester both startled and pulled away from the body. Both looked at Agent Shepherd, although their reactions were different. As he stood up to follow Shepherd towards the other, Samuel said, "a shame, but I was getting tired of her anyways." He gave Chester a congratulatory pat on the shoulder.

The vomit addled Evenfang got up and tired to collect himself. He went towards Buster, but Buster was bearing his fangs and something behind him. Chester spun just in time to see a cat dart away from July's corpse, carrying with a cloak of wiɳd, that seemed to pour out from the corpse's mouth and pulled last pungent fumes of breɑth along with it. The beast was carrying a spell, and it scampered into the grass and behind the vehicles, into the shadows, all with a great laμghing cape swimming behind.

The Laughing Cat sprinted from out of the shadows and jumped sideways between an agent's legs, it leapt off his thigh into another sprint and did the same to two more people before soaring onto the hood of and SUV and turning around, eyes full of a hungerless predation. The agents had each been assaulted by cats, they cat scratches on their hands and faces. Each of them, along Samuel, Shepherd, and Chester looked and the beast for moment, and everything seemed still. Their tattoo's did not activate, none reported undue pain. Then each one doubled over and succumbed to nausea and vomiting.

Chester could see the full spell now, it was pestilent blood-brown mangy feline form the clutched to the shoulder of the calico cat that carried it, a set of strings tangling into the animal's breɑth. Seeing what happened to the others was similar to himself, he got on his radio and called Wolfgang for help.

Chapter 9

Timothy tread carefully away from the veterinarian clinic. There was a ring of cats blocking the parking lot, so he tried to pass through the yard of the neighboring apartment building, yet a sudden squeal and panic caused his to fall. He saw and incredible amount of shining eyes in the dark and scrambled to his feet to get away.

The town was still awake and in rough shape. He could see the smoke of two separate house fires in the distance, and ambulance sirens were haunting the main road.

Suddenly a voice said, "hey, what are you still doing out?"

Timothy found a police officer addressing him from the road. He replied, "I'm going home, I-"

"Good. I don't need anymore trouble tonight."

He left before the boy could get in a word.

Timothy continue on, taking alleys and side paths where he could, staying away from the open. For some strange reason he felt he had to conceal himself. He emerged from an alley near a home where a woman was hoisting a garbage bag filled with spilled oil and kitty liter and the eviscerated feathery destruction of what may have once been a pillow.

The woman struggled to get the bag over the lip of the garbage can. Timothy offered, "can I help?" The woman looks with a, "what-" as she misplace her hand and the bag fell and tore open, splattering mess everywhere. She look at the boy with disdain.

He kept moving.

Timothy came to a house with a woman in the front yard imploring her pet cat to come back. The cat stared at her with its back raised in sharp arch, a response entirely unnatural for the woman's pleas.

Timothy tried to sneak by, but when he passed he heard the woman shout and saw the cat dart away in the corner of his eye. He found the woman scowling at him. "Oh don't help or anything! Kids these days-" The woman turned away muttering under her breath.

Timothy kept moving.

He was almost home now, he'd increased his pace with hands in his pockets and shoulders hunched, echoing stiffed legged snaps of his boots into the night. He passed by a great hedge barrier and heard a girl's voice in the dark of the yard.

The house lights were on, the front door open, but there was no one to be seen. Then he realised the was leg hooked around the branch of the tree. A teenage girl was wedged in the air pleading for her cat to stay still. She tried to hold it as she dismounted the branches, but peril found her. With upper body falling backward, her legs held on, but reflexively she used one hand to catch herself, and without the security of both hands the cat panicked and scratched her face and chest, sending her into a panic as well.

The girl felt her legs loosing grip, the pain of claws digging into her skin only heightening her fear of the fall, when suddenly hands caught her back and shoulder, firmly holding her up. Their wasn't much decision making to be done, as the cat jumped off her she grabbed the branch with one arm and allowed her legs to slump off, and half fell half righted herself, as the man helped her into clumsy compromise.

She looked up, "thank you, I- who are y- oh you're one the seniors, aren't you?"

In the light of the front door Timothy finally got a good look at her, she was rather small, thankfully considering the situation they'd just resolved. "Oh, you're one of the freshman aren't you?"

She had the slightest smile. She looked over and found her cat, now completely at ease, waiting beside her. She pouted just a little, if only the cat could have acted this way earlier.

"I uh, I'm Tim. Are you alright?"

"Oh! Um, I'm Leeanne. Yeah! Thank you- again. Um."

They exchanged broken sentences, ums and ahs, for a splendidly painfully long ten seconds. Timothy noticed that he effectively stood between her and the door of her home, he practically jumped out of the way.

"Anyways, ah, have a good night!"

"You too," said Leeanne, taking her cat into her arms, holding tenderly as she watched him walk away.

Timothy kept walking. It had been a disturbing night. He made it home with a smile.

Wolfgang arrived to find the entire GLO camp in disarray. Some people were on the ground wretching and those still standing looked disheveled. Chester was across the way forming a spell.

"Where's August?" Shepherd caught Wolfgang before he could go further.

"Heading towards her mother. June's dead."

"July's dead, left us that monster over there."

Wolfgang sharpened his sight, the scene was a clashing of moonlight, headlights, lamps, and magic. He focused on watching Chester. As he did he continued the conversation, "Dmitri?"

"Naked in the mine."

"What?"

Shepherd called out, "alright, the witches have this. EMS is swamped, and the target is moving. We have no more time. Everyone head out to capture or kill August and May Amorevore."

Wolfgang tired to protest, but he caught something in Shepherds expression, just barely in the dark. Agent Shepherd pointed yonder as an order, yet under goggles was the slightest grin. The witch's hackles stood up, and his eyes narrowed. Under his breath he said, "so be it," and rushed to assist Chester.

Agent Samuel stayed behind, he fired a shot, "yes!"

The Laughing Cat flew backwards dead, but just as suddenly the laμghter sprung from the corpse and swallowed a long haired white cat that leapt from the grasses. The Laughing Cat reformed it's vile cloak and stared down it's opponents. The other cats in the area seemed to have calmed with July's death but they waited. There were many, too many to count while in battle. Opposed to them were Samuel, Uuwowce, Chester, Buster, and Wolfgang.

Chester said, "it changes structure when switching!"

Samuel aimed, "what's that mean?"

"Don't know."

Samuel fired again, but the Laughing Cat dodged and ran. Uuwowce lunged as it came close, It twisted violently and escaped his jaws, only to land and dig it's claws into the husky's back, before leaping at Samuel. The Laughing Cat could not penetrate his armor, and as the magic cloak followed there was a loud electric zap. Samuel managed to draw his blade and stabbed the cat into the ground as they fell. However, the laμghter detached and leapt again into the dark, an orange taby replaced it. Uuwowce whined with concern, but Samuel shouted, "kill it!"

Chester yelled to stop, Wolfgang agreed, but it was too late. Uuwowce followed the order and attacked again. This time teeth found flesh. and the strings of the laμghter found Uuwowce in turn, and great blood-brown cloak enveloping the husky before leaping off into the darkness. Uuwowce ran with the taby its mouth like a prize, completely apart from its prior focus, then he staggered over, spitting out and cat and vommitting.

Samuel grabbed his rifle and fired indiscriminatnly into the grass, a not entirely insane approach, maybe depriving the laμghter of hosts was key. However, the Laughing Cat had already recovered and revealed it's next trick. It sprinted from the shadows, wrapped in its cloak were whispɛrs, the other cats were gathering them. Animals cannot interact with magic to the extent that humans can, but this Amorevore cat possessed by a witch's last spite was obviously not normal. The now tuxedo cat bound into the air towards Samuel into a front flip, bring it's tail the and cloak down to wash over the man. The whispɛrs the laμghter captured absorbed some of it's engorged supply of wiɳd left behind by it's dying creator, and they struck Samuel in succession, covering in six sticky blobs that set off his anti-magic armor into a series of sustained electric cracks.

Samuel staggered, the armor was distracting and the power supply wouldn't last through this assault. Uuwowce limped towards him, and Wolfgang tried to intervene, but the dog vomited on its master's boot. Samuel was utterly distracted for a split moment as the malevolent creature leapt and climb around them to Samuel's mouth. Wolfgang struck them with a spell like a gust of wind, but all it accomplished was helping the Laughing Cat to retreat to the dark and send Samuel backward, before he began vomiting on the ground.

Wolfgang closed in, but instead of running away the little Laughing Cat faced him and walked closer. Neither changed coarse, the beast jumped towards his exposed leg, but it was snatched clean out the air and forced the ground. Wolfgang's counter-magic breαth fizzled and jammed against the laμghter and with his other hand he attempted to diffuse it. However, all it seemed to do was release the bonds upon the physical cat, and the laμghter shot off.

Chester was in perfect position to catch and tear it apart. Chester dodged. He shot a look at his brother from over his glasses, "I can't. Her magic hurts me no matter what I do."

Wolfgang came to regroup as they both watched for the next Laughing Cat to appear. "You can't just give up."

Chester looked a little angry, "I'm not. I'm strategising. Scream: Denial Perseverance." Buster stood ready as a familiar to deliver the spell, Chester layered it into his wolf's breαth, a glimmering blue headed of serpent like dog with slicked back hair, cracking from beneath the surface was passionate magenta hue.

Chester had two other groωls swimming along his hips at the ready. He said, "I'll kill it, you catch it."

"Deal."

Chester ran forward, yelling, "courage, Buster!"

A short haired chaotic calico made it's move, the menacing red of the laμghter shining in it's eyes as it leapt from atop an SUV towards Chester, it's cloak filled to the brim with unstable engorged whispɛrs. He twisted away, giving just enough time for Buster to strike. The wolf, bearing its own sϛream mantle caught the cat in it's jaws.

Wolfgang circle around and quickly as he could, while the cat clawed and gnashed at Buster's snout. The wolf bit down the sϛream triggered. A power blue burst disrupted the laughter and ripped it from its host simultaneous with its own attempt to switch. The laughter was followed by a steaming magenta and fizzled and jammed the laμghter's structural shifting. Of course, Wolfgang grabbed on with both hands and squeezed. However, the laμghter began burning through its cloak, writhing to sustain and escape. Several cats screeched from the shadows and ran to obtain it. Chester fired off two groωls with quick lead jabs that scared off two of the interlopers, then he and Buster charges the others.

Wolfgang finally managed to clamp his hands shut, shattering the spell's structure, then swatted away the reaming fragments into the wiɳd. The many reflective eyes in the darkness sunk back into night.

Both men took a deep breath and had a short moment of celebration. Buster Verloam got a pet on the head and vehement, "good boy." Chester asked "What now?"

"Do you like camping?"

"I'm trying to join you and dad, aren't I?

Wolfgang look around, "how nice of them to leave us a car. Grab the dogs and go get Dmitri. I'll meet you soon." He, leaving the downed agents behind.

Chester gathered Uuwowce and loaded him into the same vehicle they were keeping Gerrowce. He snagged some other supplies while he was at it. Buster took his rightful place in the front seat. Samuel had enough strength to watch them leave, but no more.

Gerroax was nipping at August's heels. Vernock with his mighty size ran along side, so confident that he needn't over exert. The black cat woman bound and leapt on all fours along the side of the rode toward town. She attempted to give them the slip when the landscape provided her a rock or tree, but the dogs were fast. She wouldn't be able to hide either, the scent of Vernock's urine on her leg made sure of that. It was her human endurance and Wolfgang's orders giving her an edge.

August approached a home at the edge of town, fearing being seen she needed to switch tactics. She took to to a tall tree, with branches high enough that hands would allow her escaped from the German shepherd. Vernock was another issue entirely.

Gerroax slammed it paws on the trunk and began aggressively ranting for the whole world to hear.

"Sshhh, Sshh!" August pleaded, "stop barking. I'm not running a way, I'll go back I promise!"

Gerroax did not relent. August drew her knife, "please stop. Listen." Vernock placed a paw on Gerroax's back and stared him into calm.

A light flicked on and a figure peered out from the window.

August looked into the eyes of the human-faced sire wolf, she adjusted her grip on the knife in her hand. "This sucks," she muttered. "Listen, I'll go with Wolfgang, I promise. I need to see my mom first, okay? You can follow me, just let me go, I won't run I promise."

Vernock was crouched low, his head cocked, but he stood slowly and sniffed the air intently.

From the house they heard a horrified, "what is that?!"

Vernock stepped back and knoded to August.

As a man was coming out his back door with a gun and flashlight, she said, "hey you, go distract that guy."

Vernock gave approval and Gerroax obliged, approaching the man friendly at first, then lowering into a strange playful aggression, barking and circling the poor fellow, who yelled in shock and tried to bargain with the dog. August slid down and patted Vernock on the back, together they sprinted towards the house and climbed off the shed onto the roof with two great leaps.

As they ran roof to roof, Vernock howled into the air, evidently a signal for Gerroax. The two of then dismount near the apartments, following the alleys and jumping into backyards with ease. They paused near a main road. Gerroax came trotting along, sniffing out cats, when Vernock signaled again.

They sprinted across the open space and back in between buildings, nimbly avoiding trees and vaulting fences. They reached the veterinarian clinic, and August let out a primal hiss that parted the ring of cats before them. Vernock and Gerroax followed behind, being accosted with hissing. The dogs were panting vigorously.

August said, "wait here," and left them in the shadow of trees. Vernock had a mind to follow her, but she was approaching a man sitting against the dumpster. He waited and watched.

"Hey, dad," August knelt down beside Leonard West.

He leaned against the dumpster, his posture not so much sitting as flopped. His face was pale yet his eyes were red, as if his body tried to draw tears but there was only a dry despair left at bottom of the well. There was a spark of life in his eyes. "Hey, babygirl," he said in weak fatherly tone. This spark of life died just as quickly as his eyes traced over her, her beautiful face atop a naked body changed into something bestial and foreign. August could see it in his breɑth, a response of primal defense, the some fleeting disgust, then it all just gave up and his skin was battered by the wiɳd. She placed a hand on her father's cheek.

"Mom did a number on you, huh?"

He didn't respond.

"What can I do for you, dad?"

His eyes rotated and met hers, "I want see you again, I want to spend time with my daughters. June's still a nurse I here, and did July get that job here at the vet?"

He spoke like sirens weren't going, like cat's weren't starring, like they wasn't next to dumpster reeking of horse shit and moldy hay. He spoke nostalgically, like an old friend catching up after far too long apart.

"They're doing good, dad." August clasped his hands. "But, I don't think you'll ever see us again after tonight. This is it."

"Oh-" he said softly yet sharp, as if he wasn't even allowed a reaction.

"How's you dog?" She rubbed his hands.

"I found him choked on his own puke, skin burned, today."

August's pupil narrowed, "I'm so sorry, Dad."

He smiled, "thanks, babygirl. You're my whole world, you know that?" Leonard squeezed her hand, his grip was deathly frail.

August adjusted her stance, she pulled the knife from her belt. She said, "I love you, dad, and I'd never want you to be alone." She held her lips to his forehead and slid the knife, quickly yet gently, through his throat and in between the vertebrae.

August left her knife and the corpse of Leonard West behind. His eye sockets were vacant and lips curled with a relief that came far too late.

"You're finally here," said May Amorevore as August entered the back room of the clinic. "The glowies are coming, I've already told them to leave or else."

August was rather solemn, her breɑth still held that same unyielding temperament of playful and predatory, but in this moment it was far more toward the later. "Did you watch?"

"Watch what? I saw you coming, but I've been busy gathering the cats. I'll tell you the plan, first we need to finish you."

"June is dead, mom. July probably is too."

"We need to move fast. Look," May displayed for her a teenage girl, laying on the stainless steel table with a deep read undulating foam saturated with certain wiɳd filling her mouth. It was similar to the undulating mass of blood and magic that covered May's chest. "You should be almost there, hurry and take hers."

May fed upon another cat as August examined the girl's eyes. Within them squirmed something very foul and leeching, from somewhere beyond the wiɳd.

August said, "I am close to being finished," she rubbed her own eyes, "close enough to know how much more I need. She won't cut it, she's not saturated enough."

"What if you draw from the cat's? We can make more, and surely it will help." May stood, looking at the girl she'd prepared now with disdain, like a broken tool.

August moved around the table, "that would take to much time, and it's still not what I need. I need it ripe and wise, thick and knowledgeable. Someone that's not just saturated, but deep." She approached her mother, and placed a hand on her chest.

"What are you- you can't be serious," May recoiled, but to her horror it was already too late.

August's hand made contact with the sludge, and it wrapped around her fingers like strings. She pulled one, "don't run, mom." May tried to take a step backward, but she stopped, a wave of dizziness over took her. August pulled another, "this is your magnum ops," she pulled another, "we have no other choice," she pulled the forth, "I will fulfill everything you've worked for."

May was moving slowly, she backed into a cabinet, August still came closer. She was still shorter that her mother, yet imposingly towered above her. August pulled upon her thumb, "you love me, don't you?"

The Steward, founder of the Amorevore family coven, said, "this is my power. I found it, I gave it to you."

August starred deep into her mother's eyes. The girl's pupils were becoming more cat like, but her irises were young and natural. The mother's eyes were experienced and stained into a stark moonlight gold, as befitting a true witch. The girl replied, "you did give me this power, and now I'm using it."

She brought her hand to her mother's chest, piercing her finger into her mother's bullet wound. "Look at you, your done. How long can you stay like this? What happens when you run out of cats?"

May shuttered and melted against the cabinet.

August continued, "look how well you do as you're told, you're not even getting sick. Deep down you know this is it, you want this, right mom?" She whispered in her mother's ear, "you want relief, don't you?"

Again she starred into her eyes intently. May could do nothing but look back at them, her daughter's cunning hungry evil eyes.

August took a roll of bandages and wrapped it around her head. She sucked the foul magical foam out of the teenage girl's mouth and left her their to rest. The corpse of May Amorevore lay on the floor with empty eye sockets.

The GLO dispersed across the town and began issuing commands to the local emergency services locate the wanted individuals. This proved difficult as the town was abuzz with a multiple minor emergencies. They checked the hospital, the witch's homes, and all other locations of interest. They stationed agents at major intersections as other patrolled. Asking questions about all this with civilians was a tiresome process.

Shepherd ordered his driver to keep moving while he sat in the back and fiddled with a convoluted device that provided more detailed reading then their goggles. Issue with tracking the domain was not that it was harder to detect, but to the contrary it was so every present that discerning meaningful data from it hand so far been in effective with technology, at least until very recently. As he got it tuned the meter's all seemed to spike and fade to zero.

Wolfgang drove calmly through town to avoid attention. He could see the thickness and flow of the domain, he just didn't know the town well enough to guess where it might be leading him. Then to his shock the calico undulations of the Amorevore's domain weakened, then stopped, then died. Instead of following the strength of it, he followed the deterioration. The Steward was dead, and without any other fail-safe witch to take her place the domain was crashing.

He found himself passing near a packing lot with a horde of cats. He slammed the breaks and got out, ready for anything. However, there were no fighting, no excitement. There was only Gerroax sitting at attention, Vernock laying prone on the roof of the clinic watching, and August telling the cats to shew and go home.

"Hey," she said, "I'm ready if you are."

"Ready?"

"You're sweeping me off my feet, aren't you, big guy?" Her tone was as cutesy as ever. She wore a blindfold over her eyes, at night. When he began to ask questions she interrupted and stated flatly, "it's only me. Keep me safe and I'll give you what you need."

Vernock lifted his head and jumped down, starring at the sound of approaching vehicle. Agent Shepherd arrived scattering the horde of cats, and he got out, side arm drawn. "Wolfgang, seize that woman!"

The Evenfang, facing his feline companion rolled his eyes. He said over his shoulder, "we need to talk!"

Shepherd tapped his foot quietly, he called Gerroax to his side who obliged.

Wolfgang said loudly, "Vernock, hold her." The sire wolf came close and readying himself as if to pounce on August at any moment, she did not seem worried. Under his breath, Wolfgang said, "thank you, Dmitri," and pulled a small packet and Hag's Candy from his belt. He popped the coated berry into his mouth and place the packet between his teeth.

He turned and walked towards Shepherd, and calmly and casually as possible.

Agent Shepherd said, "so what is it? Don't even try to change my mind, I'm taking her dead or alive," he continued rambling, but he wasn't a fool. through his goggles and watched Wolfgang's breœth for any sign of spell casting, but the witch showed absolutely none.

Wolfgang came near. The driver rolled down the window, one hand hidden. Agent Shepherd urged him to speak with irritation. With flick of his finger Wolfgang signaled Vernock, who howled and signaled Gerroax, who clamped onto Shepherd's gun hand. Wolfgang, with the Hag's Candy wedged in his cheek, cracked the packet with his teeth and blew with all his might, spewing sleeping powder all over Agent Shepherd and the driver. He spat out the packet and residual power and began chewing the Hag's Candy for dear life. Shepherd swore and cursed him, but along with Gerroax he sunk to the ground.

Vernock and August made for the vehicle. Wolfgang carried Gerroax. A single black cat followed and leapt onto August's lap. "Oh, you're so sweet," she laughed as drove away.

Chapter 10

Wolfgang and Chester met up at at Stiller's Mine. Dmitri was naked except for his shoes, he did not have socks. He sat subtly seething, and now wearing Chester's cloak around his waist. The radios and vehicles could be tracked, but that was fine, they only needed distance. They left and drove up an access road heading north into the mountain. The road quickly turned to trail, and trail to a much smaller trail. They followed as far as they could, then unloaded the dogs and gear. Each man carried one of the incapacitated dogs, and August helped Vernock balance supplies on his back. They stole away into the night survived in the dark of the woods. It was long and grueling, and the sound of the helicopter and the gaze searchlights brought them no comfort. They remained unmolested began planning.

Wolfgang announced, "we're taking the long way home. We survive out here, make to an Evenfang Coven, then keep a low profile."

"How long is finding a friendly coven going to take us?" Dmitri, sitting naked and cold.

"Depends on the dogs."

Gerroax recovered from the sleeping powder by the next morning. Uuwowce recovered as well but was incredibly thirsty. The injured Gerrowce was most concerning, however Chester had snagged July's confiscated broom stick, and using it under their arms, the men could make the task of carrying him viable.

After the first night, hunger was bothersome, and dehydration was a concern, but the titular Eden's Creek filled their bellies. With no other path but to move forward, they traveled the mountain, far beyond any access the GLO had, and eventually beyond the point of it being worth while to pursue them.

It was a survival situation, and very difficult one at that with this many mouths to feed. It was Wolfgang's experience as a special consultant for the Forest Service and the group's sheer might that kept them alive. They took any water they could get, risking any illness that might come in the following weeks. August and her cat proved effective at hunting rodents, the field mice almost seemed to come to her. It was enough to give the dogs the occasional snack. More than once it was Vernock that saved them, leaving their camp for and returning only to fetch Wolfgang to carry back sire wolf's deer.

Some days they traveled, some days they had to wait. From the mountains to the plains the available resources changed. They debated on following the highways or sneaking passed. It was harsh at first, but a few small successes, some acts of teamwork, and the acceptance that their conflict had been left behind slowly brought a jovial, if rugged and exhausted, air over the group. Fortune of fortunes, even Gerrowce made enough of a recovery to walk. Still their health was on decline.

"Well, with everything that happened, at least August is fun to be around," said Chester, piling wood into Wolfgang's arms.

"Has Dmitri explained why he's naked yet?"

"Nope."

The two of them snickered.

Wolfgang said, "at least he's making the most out our food."

The journey had its disturbing moments. Even after escaping Eden's Creek there was still concern of being found, just not by the GLO. They never allowed anyone in the group to be alone, which was easy enough given their numbers.

There was a particular patch of forest near the border of Utah and Idaho that gave them multiple sleepless night. Soon after entering they each reported the distinct feeling of being watched. Everyone was on edge watching the periphery of their vision. They never saw a thing. When nightfall came, a distinct irregular and rhythmic tapping, like a tree being smacked with another thick piece of wood, kept them awake. The dogs

never reacted to anything that night. They left that forest and still felt the eyes on their backs a hundred yards into the brush-lands. They looked back and saw nothing but the tree tops swaying.

The journey wore on. Conversation grew scarce while they walked.

"So, you big brute, is this how you treat all the captive brides?" August jested, wearily trying to get comfortable near the camp fire, and failing. Her tone carried an invitation.

"Absolutely not," Wolfgang blurted. His tone reject it. An unhappy silence hung over them. Finally he said, "my uncle will make arrangements with you. I promise, you'll be safe."

August rolled over without another word. She still wore her blindfold, although it seemed it didn't impair her vision.

On another occasion Chester said, "do you ever feel like she looking at you?"

Wolfgang replied, "its different isn't it? There no pnuema leaving that cloth."

"When I woke up this morning, she was looking at me, I felt like my heat wasn't beating."

"I think were all tired. And she is- " They glanced at the cat witch, her slender fur covered curves accentuated as she stretched before they left camp. Wolfgang finished, "difficult."

The last leg of their journey brought them through the wild passes of the Teton Mountains along the border of Idaho and Wyoming. They could see their destination town in the valley afar. The group was ragged, and poor Gerrowce had lost what little strength he had to hunger and thirst. The witches quietly hinted at the dog's fate, but Wolfgang was holding on to hope. He and Vernock had begun a circular breαthing ritual, hiking together and drinking in the wiɳd of the forest, effectively creating a mutual puppeteering stimulation of raw animalistic drive. The man was quite literally carrying the burdens of the group. Vernock, whose duties and loyalties were to the Evenfang coven as a whole was proudly refusing to be coddled.

The next day they took a break at the head of small valley, where the loose surrounding foliage likely held many game trails. It was here that the dogs picked up on a scent, and sat at attention anxiously. The witches were discussing if they had it in them to make it, or if they'd be hospitalized at the end of this, if it meant the GLO's clerks would find them after all they'd suffered. Then a group of deer trotted by with complete disregard for them.

The dogs anxiously stepped towards the scent from which the deer were fleeing.

"Vernock, settled the dogs," Wolfgang commanded. He summoned his strength, his steps were heavy, too tired to engage his muscles with grace. He sniffed the air, and thumbed the wolf teeth on his bracelet.

They didn't have to wait long, It was coming their way. First was a gopher, that emerged from its hole and sniffed about the surface. The critter met the source of the scent, but it did not run. Walking slowly and clumsily from trees on the other side of the clearing was young buck with clouded eyes. Wolfgang could see from here what it was, the malformed antlers did not raise upwards, but rather shot backward and forward, then bent at sharp right angles forming a spiky clockwise box around the deer's head. The base of the antlers was bloody with smaller spikes wrapping back into the bone of the deer's skull, covered in velvet boils.

"Mad Crown," said Wolfgang.

The group immediately focused, Vernock reasserted that the dogs stay still. Dmitri asked, "give me a break. Were going to have to hike back up?"

"No. It's too close to a town. It's young, first or maybe the second year of infection. There will never be a better time to kill it. And they need to be eradicated regardless. He looked over his group, a silent dissent hung in the air. Everyone was at their limit. He began to list to the side, over taken by fatigue for just a moment. Wolfgang shook it off, "I'll do it myself, but I think I'll pass out afterwards."

Chester said, "You know, we've got a broom. One of us could fly and bring back help." They began thinking it over, he added, "Obviously not you, and I'm not leaving Buster here."

That left Dmitri to side-eye August. His embarrassing situation had hung over him the whole trip. Chester and Wolfgang both endured sunburns, having shared the last cloak so that he could cover up. In front of him sat Werloax, an assigned familiar for the duration of the operation. He was an Evenfang, even if not part of the true coven like the others. It would make for a natural reward to have him keep the wolf, if he proved himself useful. More opportunities to get out of the lab could open up for him.

August was inhaling, ready to speak.

"Jeez, Chester," Dmitri ruffled Werloax's ears, "you're making me look bad. Obviously I can't leave this guy behind either. And after everything you two have done for me this trip, how could I sleep at night if I let you get killed." He stood up with a playfully smug smile and walked up the side of the valley to watch the hideous thing beyond.

Chester followed to cover the lower side.

August spoke up, "I'll go then. I'll fly to town and get help."

Wolfgang eyed her up and down. She was unreadable. She was a murderer. She was perfectly pleasant through out the trip. They were desperate. The monster on the other end of the clearing could not be bargained with. He said, "I've got no way for you to show you're working with us."

"Don't worry about that, I can be very persuasive," she said with a little sway side to side. Took her cat towards the dogs. "Vernock, you're going to be fighting, aren't you? Your so responsible. Gerroax, Gerrowce, Uuwowce, you three protect her. I mean it, I'll be back to get her."

Wolfgang smiled, "hurry, please."

She took the broom began running to find a good jump point before leaping into the air and gliding off towards town. Hopefully she would go undetected by the public. Wolfgang marched up the middle of the little valley clearing, Vernock followed. On the other side was a deer of Mad Crown, a Young Prince as it were. At the hoof of that Young Prince, was a gopher, vivisected at the spine, bloody, tortured, and still making the occasional squeak of pain. At least one of its lungs was in still in tact. It was unable to go into shock, loose consciousness, or for a few more excruciating moments die.

The Young Prince Vs. Wolfgang Evenfang & Company

Wolfgang scouted the local whispɛrs, he found two suitable and then began forming his own wδrds, and transformations other whispɛrs to construct what he could not at will. Chester began working as well. It was a very long few minutes, each second of preparation more precious than the last.

Dmitri said with alarm masked by measure, "It noticed us."

The Young Prince stood with its head lowered, mouth slovenly dripping viscera. It did not chew or swallow. Its fur was still clean, its muscles still full, but the only thing that skin concealed was death. Its eyes were clouded and limp, pnuema spread out from them in ambient waves, not focused sight. It was the ears that gave away its thinking, if such an abomination could think. The scent of serene macabre bewitchment wafted up the valley towards them.

Wolfgang tossed a groωls to Dmitri, and all three put their groωls to circle their heads and their dogs heads in shared circuit, letting out a soft sizzling sound as it made contact with the scent in the air. Next, he and Vernock produced a viscus adept breαth. Wolfgang left with his wδrds clinging to his waist and shoulders, unconjugated but at the ready. He left the majority to be carried by Vernock who added his own wolven wδrds to the munitions. This was the Evenfang's battle technique, the Standard Fangs, an art of rapid casting. It was difficult to fight, cast, and hold the components simultaneously, thus was a familiar supremely useful.

The Young Prince still stood over the its victim, likely the gopher still had a drop of lifeblood left. A cautious silence held their tongues, lest they attract the Prince's ire too soon. Then It finally raised its head, and the scent hit them like a wall. Wolfgang and Chester took the brunt of it, their wolves with much stronger senses

of smell staggered. Dmitri was the least effected, "it's coming." The abomination had not only been finishing the gopher, it had also been preparing. Wolfgang watched it move closer, with supernatural speed it stuttered forward, but when the groωls orbited past his face, sizzling intensified, the movement again appeared as a limping walk.

Wolfgang took one step forward, and seemingly within that same time the Young Prince took five. Another second and the thing would be on top of him, with lips covered in gopher blood and a tounge covered in death. The step he took would have put him too close, if he wasn't already telling his muscles to throw a lead jab, and from it he launched and lime-green spiralating spell, Growl: Up-Fang. The spell quickly spun out into a cone of forward force disrupting the scent in the air and pushed the deer's head for just a split second. Then he followed up with a right straight, Moan: Down-Fang. This zapripherating squirt lobbed onto The Young Prince and sent spasms through its front legs and neck. It still needed its nervous system to move. However, at the same time Wolfgang inhaled, he took another hit the abomination's scent. Both were inhibited.

Vernock reloaded him and Wolfgang fired off another combination, one-two, Up-Fang Down-Fang. The Young Prince couldn't send signals to its legs, its body was ceased still, but the effect was not enough to damage or last. The witch had to work fast, to pile up effect and give himself an opening. To stay safe he had to get closer to danger, to circle around to the side and deliver a kick to knock the creature over. He did this with his senses in a haze, Chester and Dmitri's voices helped.

He continued, One-two! Vernock reloaded and Wolfgang slapped together the spells with in mere seconds. What these spell lacked in strength or the ability to travel they made up for in efficiency. One-Two!

The scent was still in the air, his senses still murky, he moved carefully across the forest floor. Vernock followed behind him, eyes sharpened to razors upon the target. Both of them could feel its limp unfocused rotting sight that spewed cruelty on everything in view. The tactic worked, Wolfgang fired one last Up-Fang towards the head, and lifted his leg to slam into its side.

The Young Prince went down, the nerves along it's upper spine jammed with interference. However, the internals of it's body were still very much active. As Wolfgang readied something more substantial, it gave the Young Prince just enough time for its neck to finally respond. Vernock had already bit into Wolfgang's belt and was pulling him back as he noticed the lump in the abomination's neck. They dashed backward together, both too fatigued to life their feet higher than the light incline, causing them to fall. They caught each other and scrambled back two steps as the Young Prince puked black bile.

As it writhed both Chester and Dmitri fired off more potent pain-inducing spells to buy Wolfgang time. He finished his next spell, but the Young Prince was not done with its countermeasures. From the other end of the deer a ghastly cloud of the flatulent scent ripped forth and caught him. He misfired the spell. They were dazed but not done.

Chester and Dmitri covered them with more spells, but as the cloud spread out they struggles as well. Of course they were, sun burned, near starving, dehydrated, on poor sleep, and exhausted from weeks of survival. This was horrible idea. They should have ran. The Young Prince managed to get to its feet, and began to walk forward. It's head twitched, it's lips dripped bile. Wolfgang need time for something strong than an Up-Fang. Vernock began to cross in front of him.

"No! You're the making it back," Wolfgang commanded. Maybe he was thinking how the Sire Wolf as was a very valuable asset, or perhaps it was the charms on his wrist digging into his skin. They walked backwards. He was running low on ammunition, with another one-two to keep It at bay the pair had exhausted their supply of whispɛrs and wδrds.

Vernock growled, The Young Prince began to heave. Wolfgang was working on the finisher, but the Young Prince was mounting bile faster, the pressure building and rising in its throat. Chester and Dmitri both fire spells in panic, Wolfgang moved one leg in front of Vernock. The Young Prince's throat was bulging with infection, with Mad Crown, with death.

That was when they all saw Gerrowce, the spell burned wolf-dog, more weary and beaten than any of them, pounce at full sprinting speed and sink his jaws into The Young Prince's neck. The abomination and the beast twisted to the ground, and for a brief moment it was unclear which was more to be feared. Gerrowce ripped and tore with savagery unbound, until a chunk of flesh and bile spilled forth, then it bit again and again, working it's way to The Prince's spine, working until it was done.

The Young Prince contorted and thrash unlike an animal being killed. Another wave of scent released, but Gerrowce's adrenaline and instinct was not overcome. The witches' spells had missed, they watched, it was all they could do. Wolfgang had paused, disappointed and somber.

Gerrowce finally stopped, and laid down on top of its kill. It looked up at Vernock. The sire wolf couldn't get closer, he began to coo and whine and sing to the wolf-dog. Gerrowce let out a bark and wagged his tail.

"You're a good boy," said Wolfgang.

"Good boy," shouted Chester.

"Good boy," said Dmitri

Gerrowce barked one more and laid his head down atop the deer, wagging his tail softly. He followed with his eyes as Wolfgang made a wide circle to face him, so as to avoid any fluids that had spilled. Vernock threw back his head and was joined by Gerroax, Uuwowce, Werloax, Buster Verloam, and even August's black cat in a mighty howl that was swallowed by the trees but pierced the veil of the heavens. Gerrowce wagged his tail vigorously one last time and lowered his head to rest. His bright blue eyes looked back at them. Wolfgang drew his sidearm and aimed very carefully at the wolf-dog's head. Chester tossed out his cloak to cover the splatter.

For the next twenty minutes, Wolfgang repeatedly cast his Strange-Fang to cook and kill all the material under the cloak. Chester aided his, taking care of the surrounding area. Dmitri gathered sticks to mark out a perimeter. When they were done they collapsed in the shade. An hour later August returned with water and some help. Five hours later the local coven arrived with the arrangements they'd made. An emergency deployment of witches, special consultants working under the Forest Service, like Wolfgang, arrived to handle the mess. The group had to stay in quarantine for several days, luckily it was all handled by the team who had strong ties with the local Evenfang Coven.

Aftermath

The GLO stayed keen on locating August Amorevore, until a series of letters signed by her were distributed to the surrounding covens notifying Stewardship of the town was temporarily being held by the GLO do to a tragic accident within the Amorevore Coven. A year later another series of letters arrived to the surrounding covens declaring August Amorevore dead. Thus the town quietly slipped out of the Grand Old Coven's control. The GLO stopped pestering the Evenfangs after that.

Senior Field Agent Shepherd remained on duty with Utah's GLO field agent team. His career stagnated. Junior Field Samuel Johnson received a promotion and was stationed in Eden's Creek during the construction of the towns new magic management pylons, which the populace told to be a major upgrade to their electrical grid, which was true to some extent. The project has not yielded the desired results, and Samuel has largely bore the responsibility for that. Junior Field Agent Jake Smith would eventually recover, albeit with permanent minor brain damage. He returned to field work but would transfer to clerk duties five months later. His job is very boring.

The people of Eden's Creek gradually forgot that fateful night, life moved on. After the pylons were constructed there was a sharp increase in cases of tinnitus in the town. Investigations proved inconclusive. The town's cat population has starkly declined, many contact illness and died younger than usual. The stray population seemed to gradually wander off into the wilderness. The vast majority of residents report being dog lovers.

Wolfgang added a blue charm to his bracelet next to the other two wolf teeth. He returned to his role as a special consultant with the Forest Service far to the north, a region where Lord Jovian had friends among the GLO leadership. Chester would go on to join Wolfgang hunting monsters for two years, before the trajectory of his life shifted dramatically. He married the founding member of a new Evenfang sister coven, the mysterious and meteorically rising star Augustia Dawnfang. They had twin boys together, sadly, Chester Evenfang would pass away from poor health when his boys were just two years old. Thankfully, their acclaimed uncle Wolfgang Evenfang would take it upon himself to visit frequently. The twins were practically the only thing that could pull him away from the forest. He is like a father to them.

All the Little Children

Once upon a time,

All little children went about their chores.
With many troubles, twas never a bore.
Here was Gaby, in wing skirt of the crows,
Conversing with, binding livestock in rows,
"See here you cattle, you could have grazed there."
Cattle skedaddled from pasture most bare,
"We were afraid of rules, always unfair."
Gabby connected herds, always with care.

Children all gathered to report their ills.
Sella who managed bird, beast, and livestock,
Wore albatross feathers from head through frock.
"Hush now you youngers, you carry dad's will."
Then dad emerged from his shop, "Clockmaker,
Artisan, I am. You are my Message,
for this I made thee. These problems are yours."
Sad children all left, willpower restored.

Three of the children worked within dad's house,
Five children returned to working without.
Then came the sixth, who had not joined the grouse.
Sammy the strong, his belt eagle harpy,
came to see his older sister, Gaby.
"Sister, I need a spear, show me again."
Mike, whose belt was of swan, "make me, my friends,
a golden sword to bring wrongs to an end."

Each of the children did as they were made,
but time and again problems did not fade.
Yuri, marked in rooster, planned out the fields,
organizing dogs, maximizing yield.
Collies unhappy, they're disrespected,
Yuri's suggestions always rejected.
Remmy in heron, patient, great, and blue,
told other children compromise would do.

The dogs were in protest, they would not herd.
Yuri descended to give them a word.
"Cows make hard life in pasture so breezy,
if they went our way, life would be easy."
Yuri heard the Collies speak selfish thoughts,
"Think of the meek hens and do as thou aught.
Cows too! A calendar we all must keep.
For dad and for all, the harvest we reap."

Hens rode the cattle who fielded the plow,
They picked at grain while Cows upheld their vow.
"The hens don't listen, they eat all my grain,
saving some now would prevent further pain."
Remmy stood on high, "let's all compromise,"
Hens must divvy a forth back to the land.
They bawked on the cow, each their own man,
but some held it more sacred than was wise.

An angry collie menaced the others,
loosing its mind, it blamed all its brothers.
Lucy the eldest, with hat, cape, and dress
of peacock, acted abhorred of the mess.
"Make an example, my little brother"
Mike obliged, his blade in beautiful blur.
The collies all bowed, and gave Mike his praise.
Lucy proudly smirked at siblings she raised.

"Where are the dogs when they are needed most?
Hens are burning my hair, crowing in boast,"
Cow bucked and snorted as hens cavorted.
Raph, in pants feathered killdeer, ran along
quickly, soothing the scene with gentle song.
Aid he afforded to all distorted.
Hens were creatures of ignorance and good
and malice. If taught they'd cherish chalice.

Azzy, her ringed hair dressed in birds humming,
Came with wheeled cart supplied with gears thrumming.
"What bothers you Raph, it can't be so bad,
tell me before I must resupply dad."
"Azzy, dear sister, take pity on me.
Hens need direct guidance. It's maddening."
"Do not disobey, persist in your chores.
I will not tell Lucy, speak this no more."

Chicken blood covered the ground and dog teeth,
Chicken's lamented and fashioned their wreath.
Raph ran, "Look over here! Drop those eggs thief."
"Do not distract us, the hens deserve grief.
We know penance, Our kin buried beneath."
Raph was appalled. "Dogs, what is this belief?"
"Fool! Dog, Cow, and Hen, before you were born,
without relief, have known Clockmaker's scorn.

"Help," Yuri cried, her governance frazzled.
"We cows will starve hens, they will pick our fleas!"
Raph arrived, his new ornament dazzled:
Secretary feathers, "We are not pleased!"
Cows writhed, on back hens shook, "our hooves are might!
Yuri bemoaned, "we must all do our best!"
Raph held his brother, "we're in for a fight.
Of this group choose one and slaughter the rest."

Yuri came to Remmy's call, new Shoebill
feathers, standing tall. Collie's disregard
of proper job, "it's our right, it's our thrill."
"Hens live you rob," Remmy said, "you are barred!"
"Dear Remmy give up how you regulate,"
Yuri professed, "dodge war of attrition."
"This is the rub, we are bound to this fate."
"it's for the best. Create your own mission."

Azzy, unloading cart into the home,
Was shocked to see barking dogs freely roamed.
"What is all that noise!?" "I'll handle it, dad!"
Azzy went fourth and found much disarray,
This did not seem like work, this seemed like play.
Dogs were submitting to chickens and cows,
Cattle were herding and hens were growing,
Hybrids eloping, their elegance drowned.

Lucy tended candles, the burning fruit
of the tree, only thing dad didn't make.
She felt glee and pride that this was her suit.
Azzy came and whispered of disaster.
Lucy smiled, "Fear not. I'll go keep this mute.
No one understands how much is at stake.
We are the message. all weeds we'll uproot.
Stay here sister, so you can work faster."

Lucy came, "Gabby, dear, what have you done?"
Atop a dead cow, with hens she had fun.
"I have added woodpecker to my skirt!"
"Plowing yourself, With disaster you flirt."
"You've it easy, eldest sister of mine.
Your candles do nothing, you sit and learn,
while we do the work, you bring and it burns."
"You insult me." Lucy smiled, "we refine.
Your tools, guidance to cows, is dad's design."
"Dad's failed. I'll plow myself, high time we change."

"Clockmaker am I. All Message I'll see!"
Dad's voice roared, "discord I cannot leave be."
The children prepared, Gabby went for Sam.
"Brother come here, support me as I am."
Sammy did his work always quiet, still.
Strongest of all, spear raised, waited to kill.
"Rabid dog, sneaking in, tunneled like rat:
Wild, putrid, resentful, and eating scat.
Monster emerged, Sammy brought down his spear,
it was gone, tunnel too. All near felt fear.

The children all gathered, six in the yard,
three by the house. Six were guilty, quiet
as mouse. Mike spoke up, "I don't deny it.
I detest this display, Prefer the dark."
Artisan began to tell him his place.
Lucy whispered to Sella, hiding face,
"They no longer respect kinds. Maybe you're
management will order better than mine."

"Enough of this, Message can't change my clock!
I discarded fools, I discarded snakes!
With each revision, I've given quarter.
Why must it always come to disorder?"
The children report grievances many,
as well as their own desired means and ends.
Sella intervened, "allow me father.
It seems the resentful have caused bother.

Sella declared, "Mike, remove those feathers
of owl. I will instruct you for better."
Gabby intruded, her words dissenting.
Then it fell apart. It all went a fowl.
Gabby provoked, Sella lashed out. Sammy
stepped in, and in a flash there was no doubt.
Sella fell down. All their mouths made a frown,
Lucy covered her mouth, maybe in shock.

Azzy rose and carried Sella away.
The Clockmaker brought an end to this day.
Six were cast into night with no supper.
Yuri said, "now we shall govern ourselves."
Remmy said, "with new friends, we'll bring the dawn."
Raph said, "never shall I indulge the low."
Mike said, "I will see that justice is done."
Gabby said, "none shall be chained to others."

Sammy, in mourning, spent his strength near trees,
building shelter, and keeping Dignity.
"Gabby, you're craft is better than mine, won't-"
What Sammy saw left him hurt and appalled.
Conserved Strength and shed Dignity, did all.
As beasts they sunk beyond into the wild.
Now all alone, Sammy settled for night.
He nestled with hens, the house out of sight.

The Marksman

"Do you think she'd have me all the same?"

"She chose you, Max. I've always been your better, and she chose you." "But how will I face her if I fail, Kaspar? and in front of the prince?"

I rolled my eyes as my pitiful junior jostled my shoulder, nearly spilling my drink. From the balcony of the Forester's lodge, we looked out at the men convening around the night's fire. Kilian, victor of the day's little shooting contest, was the center of attention. Each time he would laugh, Max would drink. Each time they called him the King of Marksmen, Max would twiddle the charm on his wrist. That charm marked him as the second assistant forester, I was the first, and Kilian was a peasant with great aim.

"I've lost all my luck. I used it all getting her to speak with me and now I don't have enough to keep her!"

"So you admit you won favor through chance?"

He downed the rest of his ale as a chorus erupted below us. I turned to lean on the railing and peered into the shutters of the lodge. Through the cracks I made out the large stag that Max had slain, now mounted above the door of sweet Agathe. I wonder if she is as beautiful sleeping as awake. Not my place to know, it would be Max's, but he's has always been and continues to be shy, save for a brief interlude when he curried favor with Kuno, her father and our master. He would spring to carry out our chores, and swore he'd bring home a prized kill. I'd proven myself a capable successor many times over, but that didn't seem to matter in my case.

It wouldn't matter in Max's case either if he wasn't approved. My junior got what he wished for, a betrothal, the forester's favor, and now an opportunity to be judged by Prince Ottokar. Kuno had already sent word, and the prince saw fit to visit us on his tour. Tomorrow Max would get exactly what he wished for.

I tried to finish my own drink as Max shook me again, "what am I going to do?"

"Have you considered growing a spine?"

"Have I angered you? You've always been so brotherly to me."

"As a brother I will tell you that you're drunk. Come now." I tried to bring home to our small cabin around the other side, but his incessant rambling continued.

"Kaspar, you know I'd help you, right? I'd die for you, my friend. Please, if I cannot succeed Kuno, he'll surely dissuade Agathe from marrying me. I may as well die this very moment."

"Keep shouting in my ear and I will see to it myself."

"Please! You-"

I stood him straight. "You'd be willing to die for your love?"

"Yes."

"Would you be willing to kill for it?"

That sobered him a little, he answered, "yes."

"I tell you; I know a way that you are guaranteed to hit you mark tomorrow."

"Tell me, I'll do anything."

We fetched our coats and laced our boots, I did it without stumbling. I readied my rifle, and his, then we set out.

"We're going into the woods at this hour?"

"Yes. Don't be afraid, I'll show you the way."

"I know you never get lost, but the woods are dangerous enough during the day."

"Then you'll be very concerned about this," I said jovially, and removed my charm, I gestured for him to do the same.

"If you want to be spirited away, so be it, but I'll keep mine."

"If you're too scared to go for a stroll, then you may rely on your luck tomorrow."

He still wasn't sure on his feet, but he was sure of what he wanted. We left our charms on a branch and stepped over the charmed rope that guarded the town. As the last scraps of twilight faded, the moon replaced it filling the woods with glimmers and shadows. Nearing the end of the trail I heard flapping overhead, a silhouette circled above us.

"A raven, it'll lead the wolves to us," said Max, pulling his rifle off his back.

"No, it won't," I said.

I lifted my rifle and readied the flint. I didn't bother to aim. A crack of gunpowder echoed through the branches; it was followed by much quieter thud as the raven fell dead.

"How did you manage that shot, at night no less?"

"You'll see soon enough."

I smiled and slung the rifle over my shoulder. Max asked if I wanted to reload; I declined and started us into the brush.

It was a wolf trail I followed on a whim during one of my walks, in the day light it takes me about an hour, even climbing over logs and ducking under dying husks. In the night, however, we tread carefully. Each shaft of moonlight gave us a scrap of clarity, enough to see each turn and mound gradually swallow us, blocking all sight of our home. Max was quiet most of the way, but I heard him gasp at the sight of the clearing. Across the ghostly field, the trees and branches stood barren. Each jagged branch gnawing at light, each blade of grass undulating in the wind and licking our boots as we neared throat of bushes that masked a breach in the earth. The ground gave way into a little gulch of foliage and stones, tented from the elements by a twisted canopy. A natural bedding area for the beasts, The Wolf's Glenn.

Max put a hand on my shoulder; it's wise to let sleeping dogs lie, and idiocy to wake a pack of wolves.

"Don't worry. I slew most and drove off the rest."

"You- why would you go that far?"

"I kept our lands safe. While you've been flirting, I've been working."

We entered, the blackness engulfing us till my eyes adjusted. This little shelter was barren save for a wolf corpse and few scant shafts of moonlight.

"Was this one of yours?"

"Yes," I said.

"Even in the dark this pelt beautiful, why'd you leave it here?"

"A banquet for the maggots. Straighten up, that's not why we're here." I stepped across the enclosure towards the stone fang that jut from the ground into the light.

"Samiel? O great huntsman Samiel, show yourself to me and my junior. We've come to make a deal."

I watched Max’s expression of horror as the æther gave birth to a shadow darker than black. I looked back to witness the spirit in the guise of man wearing resplendent white coat laden with myriad tools and bags of every sort that can be imagined, all in perfect order. He wore a hat decorated with feathers of birds I thought didn’t exist. But it was his face that commanded attention; dark locks of hair spilled down around a mask that denied all illumination, yet somehow every detail etched itself clearly in the mind.

Samiel held out his hand, I cupped mine underneath.

"As per our agreement," he said.

In my hand formed 3 silver balls, that give off a faint purple glint when the light hits them just right. I present one.

"This is the answer to your problem, my friend: a magic bullet."

Max whispered, "Kaspar, what devilry is this?"

The Black Huntsman passed by me with not a single earthly sound, but as he began to speak his deep crystalline voice reverberated ponderously through the marrow of my legs, a feeling I saw reflected in Max.

"You seek my aid?"

"I never imagined I'd converse with a spirit, but I'd stop anyone else from doing the same."

"Does a handful of lead weigh so heavy on your mind?" I asked.

Max took a breath, and Samiel spoke once more, "Tell me your purpose."

"I'm being tested tomorrow; I have to win so I can marry the woman I love."

"Young marksman, I will offer you a pact. Seven magic bullets that will never betray your heart's intent. Six for you, and the Last for me." Samiel raised his hand.

Max raised his in turn.

"Your next seven shots will not miss."

Max shook on the deal. He pulled his hand away and from nothing the bullets were cast in his palm.

"Good for you, my friend. Why don't you try one to set yourself at ease? Then we'll rest and tomorrow this business will be done."

He agreed and thanked the spirit before hurrying back into the field. It was then that I turned to Samiel. That black mask was inscrutable.

"I want to amend our deal."

"Is that so?"

"Don't be cross me, just hear me out. I know I refused your original offer, but I brought you another who'd take it: soon enough you'll have your shot. I'd like the other half of my life back, and in exchange, let me act as a liaison for you."

"I wish to witness his test. Show me and I'll consider it."

We heard a shot beyond the glen.

"I'd gladly take you to watch."

As I came back into the light, Max was running into the timberline. I stopped halfway across the clearing and pulled out my cleaning cloth and ram rod, I wouldn't need another shot tonight. Max returned holding an owl.

"I can't believe it. I only caught a glimpse before it took flight, next thing I know it fell clear over there."

I slung my rifle over my shoulder, and he reloaded his. We started back home. At some point we heard rustling. Max readied his rifle. A small fox hopped onto a log and looked at us. He let it go.

"Didn't want to waste it," I asked.

"No, but really I just couldn't think with that cricket in my ear."

I too was now acutely aware of the blaring chirping near us, "well then, hit it instead."

Max grinned and fired his rifle into the sky. We waited silently as the echoes faded underneath that damnable insect's crying. Then we heard a branch snap to our right, then nothing else. He chuckled to himself. Soon enough he was gaily prancing over the rope and merrily strolling towards our quarters.

I paused at the edge of town. Looking back into the wilderness I saw my own shadow cast among the others, heavy and viscus as tar. I pulled out my knife and cut the rope before stepping through. My shadow and I walked home.

In the morning I left in time to see Max sneaking into Agathe's room. I waited by the door, perhaps it wasn't necessary, but why not witness his preparations as well?

Their pleasantries end quickly as Max burst, "I tell you I've found what I need, and by the end of the day I will be your father's successor. My marksmanship can't be out done!"

"Don't boast in that way, you're beginning to sound like Kilian."

"I'm not boasting. I'm telling you, my beautiful love, to celebrate; I've found the secret to never missing a shot."

"Then tell me your secret, so that I may celebrate it."

"I can't tell you my secret, only that I have it."

"Flattery and scheming, now you sound like Kaspar. A shame, you seemed an honest man,"

"I am, and the truth is that until last night I was terrified of failing you."

"You fool, be the man I love and you can never fail me."

"I swear I will-"

That was the point I walked off with haste, a growing taste in my mouth was so sweet it made me sick, made worse by the heat in my cheeks. She thinks I'm a liar? And my protege can't spare a word to deny it? How much had I taught him over these years, and how much affection had I given that woman, how many times did I work myself ragged as she attended to her ailing father? These were the impulses marching through my mind as I marched up the street.

Soon, I found myself staring at a large and luxurious tent erected next to a carriage of unmistakable ownership. Several guards and attendants were seeing to the horses and restockingsupplies. On a whim a stepped toward a campfire tended by a maid and an unassuming man brewing tea.

"Good morning," I said in an innocent tone.

The man replied in kind, and a gestured to the fire as I warmed my hands. After pouring some tea for the maid and himself, he asked, “what brings you here?"

"I was just out for a walk and I couldn’t help but gawk at the Prince's tent. I hope I'm not intruding."

"Not at all."

"I presume the prince is resting from his journey?"

"No, he's awake, or maybe still half asleep." The man smiled and sipped his tea. "What do you do here?"

"I'm assistant to the Forester."

"Are you the one to be tested, I’m told you’re a great hunter."

"Oh no, that is the second assistant, Max. I'm Kaspar, the first, an even better hunter if I say so myself," I said playfully.

"Really? If you’re the first, why aren't you up for the role?"

"Sometimes skill isn't the issue," I said, "besides, Tracking is more my specialty and I like taking long walks in the woods. I'm not cut out writing letters and permits. Staying an assistant will suit me fine."

The man was entertained enough, but he rebuked me all the same, "I need to know this town will have a permanent and capable hunter."

"You need know?"

"Yes, I do. I am Prince Ottokar."

I pride myself on being observant, I was more surprised that I hadn't realized sooner; certain feelings were still niggling at my attention, "Your Royal Highness, I apologize-"

He waved it off and said, "Be honest, who in this town is best suited to be my Forester?"

"Perhaps I have more to teach him, and perhaps Kilian is better shot, but Max is well suited for the position, Sir."

"And who is Kilian?"

"A peasant who's bested Max in a couple contests. Just yesterday he was proclaimed King of Marksmen."

"What a bold prince am I to come to town and not pay my respects to the King." He chuckled. "Thank you for the conversation. Tell Max I wish to see him at eleven, won't you?"

"Yes, Sir."

Walking back through the town I mused at my odd luck, and I wondered if my shadow was getting the entertainment he sought. I met Max back at the lodge, and we set about our rounds without conversation. When the time came, I went with him to the prince's tent. Agathe and Kuno had gone ahead of us. Curiously a small crowd had gathered.

Prince Ottokar began, "Good people. I have come today to declare a successor to your Forester. Crops yields have been modest, hunting will be necessary to thrive. The war has left brigands through my lands, and I'll not let them use do as they please in your woods. You people deserve the best man for the job, and that man must be an excellent shot."

I took my place next to Kuno, while Max stepped forward with his head held high and a gleam in his eye, but that wouldn't last after what was said next.

"And that is why I'm declaring a contest, between Max, the Second Assistant Forester, and Kilian, the King of Marksmen!"

The crowd cheered and Kilian stepped forth with his rifle. The contest would be shot for shot, first to out match the other wins. The rules were brutal, but fair.

"Kaspar, why are to smiling like that," Agathe prodded my side.

"Am I? Just wrapped up in the excitement. Don't you worry, I'll go see him."

As the Prince lead the crowd to a target he'd arranged for, I tapped Max on the shoulder.

"My my, aren't you lucky? You get to prove yourself and put that braggart in his place."

"I want nothing but the victory," he said sharply.

"Have I upset you, Max? Is this contest worrying you?"

"I am not worried, and I don't need your schemes of revenge. I will do this on my own."

"Oh really? On your own? Were you able to get your lucky bullets on your own?"

"No, I wasn't, but I'm not using them."

"Fine. I've only tried to help you, and I'll continue to be the bigger man and help you again: Your hand is shaking, Max. Think carefully."

A farmer donated his field to the prince's contest, and the two men took up positions. Kilian boldly announced he would go first. They checked their flint and readied their shots. I watched Max pull a lead ball from his right pocket and ponder it. Kilian aimed and fired without hesitation. The target fell over and the crowd cheered. Max returned the ball to his pocket and from his left side I saw him pull out another that was shinier with just a hint of purple.

Once the target was set again, he fired. Naturally, the shot landed. The target was moved further away, and this time Max would go first.

I took my place at a distance and leaned against a tree. While watching I couldn't ignore the feelings within me. One was sickening, but familiar, as though it had been there for a while, and I just hadn't noticed. The other was new, strange, and heavy. It felt sticky, like a shadow clinging to my eyes. I heard Samiel's voice near my ear. "A contest is an intriguing development. A shame it's only a target."

Kilian matched Max's shot and once again the target was moved back.

"You'd prefer live game, wouldn't you," I said quietly.

"Yes." My bones tingled when he spoke.

Kilian took longer to aim this time, but he landed the shot. Max followed swiftly. The target was moved back.

"What good does hunting do a spirit?"

"You dine on the flesh, I dine on the soul."

Max fired his shot.

"How many has he used?"

"Six."

Kilian matched it.

"Is a human's soul better than a beast's?"

"Yes, in a way."

"I was right to refuse your deal," I muttered.

Kilian was set to attempt the farthest target yet. He failed, and began to boast, "If I can't hit that shot, neither can you, Max. Go ahead, and when you miss, we'll try again."

He pulled his last magic bullet from his pocket, he checked again counted on his fingers to make sure. Then he stood staring at it, no doubt thinking over what he'd been told. All the while Kilian played to the crowd.

"I think you should use you're shot to kill the braggart," I whispered.

Samiel's shadow clung to me. "Oh?"

"He's a fool, and so is Max for relying on these bullets. He'll be taken for murder. I'll be the Forester, and I'll keep a place for you. You could give me back my soul, and I'll help you get others."

"Do you really want that?"

"What I want never matters."

Samiel didn't reply.

Max put away the Last Bullet, and from his other pocket pulled a normal lead ball, but just as he prepared his ram starter to press it into the barrel, I saw a miraculous and terrible glint of purple. I recalled what Samiel had said the night before, "your next seven shots." A deal is a deal.

Max finished reloading and half-cocked the flint, before aiming. He stopped, evidently somewhat confused, and brought it to a full cock. Maybe the pressure had tripped him up, Kilian thought the same and made a joke. Max didn't yield. He stood back, planted on hand on his hip and the rifle into the ground. What he intended at this point didn't matter though, as somehow the flint fell and the power cracked. Both men startled as the rifle fired into the air. It was angled toward the field at the time, but that didn't matter.

A few seconds passed and everything went black.

Murmurs, screams, and frenzied footsteps: the sounds of a crowd realizing a man had just been struck dead by a bullet from the sky. Many gawked at the body of Kaspar, shocked by the sheer odds of the ball coming down to strike him.

Unseen by the crowd and unfazed by their panic, The Black Huntsman stood among them, staring upon the body with contempt. From within the corpse a glass-like dome rose. Within the faintest flickering of a candle snuffed away to impossible spaces and left behind green smoke to spill out, but the shell rooted in the man's chest did not dissipate. It was marked with veins of purple that reached out to Samiel's hand as he plucked it free. The sour smoke drained from it, slipping through his fingers. He sighed, left with only a crystal apple. He bit into it, savoring each bite as he walked through the crowd, beyond the boundaries of their mortal lives, and disappeared into the woods.

Fragment 1

Obstinance walls from, with time,
explorations labyrinthine.
Coward's respite in, we find,
sedentary Wooden Minds.

The wise rot. The wisdom rites.
Hope shall sit on Throne of Vice.