

Three Goddess Miracle Tonic

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ISBN: 9798310908970

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Front cover by Riley Jo, 2024
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Dedicated to all the other magical girls that had to make themselves along the way.

One

Rickie was absolutely certain she was getting fired. The package needed to be at 84 Charles Street by two o'clock, and she'd long since heard the church bells in Wilhelmina crash out a twin tintinnabulation letting her know she was late - again. She hadn't thought to ask which Charles Street, and she was now convinced there must be several. The first one didn't have an 84 before it inexplicably ended, and the second somehow began at building number four thousand.

Standing at the street corner with the neatly wrapped bundle in her trembling hands, Rickie fretted. In the road ahead of her carriages passed by in such numbers they were like liquid being poured from a pitcher. A slight breeze, perhaps from the traffic, rustled her coat and played lazily with the dark, rail-straight hairs hanging out from her flat cap. Looking to the street, she took one tentative step out to test the waters, then jerked her foot back to safety after finding she didn't like the temperature.

Her eyes cast about for some other solution. The thin, tall buildings that flanked the streets reminded her of cornstalks, but she couldn't just run through them like the fields back home. They made her feel claustrophobic and small. Back home, she reckoned, was where she'd be after she got fired, and that filled her with worries she wasn't aware she had room for. Maybe she didn't, and she was about to burst at the seams right here on the sidewalk, her worries bouncing out into the road and being trodden over by the passing carriages, rolling down the thoroughfare and being stepped on by businesspeople on an afternoon walk, perhaps falling down into the sewer and being devoured by rats.

She let out a protracted sigh. Her imagination wasn't helping. She turned on her heel and walked in the other direction, reasoning that if she still wasn't sure where she was going, this couldn't be necessarily wrong. She made it to the other end of the block when a whistle unleashed a shriek and sent her fingers to her ears with all haste. She tried with all she could to burrow her fingers into her ears and shut out the noise, but it still aggravated her. She felt disoriented, but more than that, trapped. She felt like the air was too heavy, the people too close, her clothes too tight to her skin. It took her some time to realize she had dropped her package into a shallow puddle, and despondently bent down, freeing one hand from her ear to reclaim it. The sodden paper felt cloying to her fingers, and she tried to hold it from the dry end, with limited success.

Rickie realized that she was close to freezing entirely if she didn't get out of the street. Whatever control she had over her body, beyond not falling to her knees and weeping, was exercised on fumbling towards the row of buildings nearest her- she passed an open-air cafe with chatting patrons, their cigarettes trailing a stomach-churning smoke that slithered across Rickie's face and left her feeling ill. The next shop had a heavy wooden door, which was closed anyhow. She rushed for it, throwing it open with eyes closed.

She felt the cold bricks of the wall behind her, her fingers tracing the space between each, the gritty mortar catching at her fingernails and chipping away as she passed over it. Her eyes still closed, she breathed deeply, which was always a useful technique when she remembered to practice it. She counted to five, and after that exhale opened her eyes. She was inside a bookshop. Three rectangular, stained wood tables were before her with rows of bookshelves further back. Afternoon sunlight streamed in through arch-top windows and specs of dust danced in the beams. Her package lay on the floor in front of her. Besides the buzz of electric dome lights above, all was finally quiet.

As her soul settled back into her body, she noticed two sets of eyes on her. A woman was seated at one of the tables, her figure

draped in a long black riding coat that made her look almost shapeless. Her face was very angular, and her pair of wide, cerulean eyes glanced at Rickie over the top of an open book about as thick as an encyclopedia, held close to her chest. Awkwardly, Rickie put up a hand and mouthed a cautious “hello.” The woman’s eyes smiled back.

“Delivery, then?” asked a deep and raspy voice from across the shop. His was the second set of eyes. The noise cut through Rickie’s newfound serenity in a most unwelcome way, and she remembered the bundle at her feet.

“Y-yes, that’s right,” she offered, stooping to grab the soggy, paper-wrapped package with as much dignity as she could save. “Is this 84 Charles Street?”

“Correct,” came the brusque reply. What luck. She hurried across the shop, burden in hand, to the till. A burly man with a coffee-stained mustache and square-rimmed reading glasses studied her as she approached, barricaded behind a wooden countertop with a glass display showing several popular titles. She stuck her hands out with the package, then imagined she looked desperately awkward in doing so, and instead set the package on the wooden countertop next to the analog register.

“It’s all wet,” he complained, tearing through the now disintegrating paper with swollen fingers, bruised as though they’d been hit by a hundred hammers in a hundred aborted attempts to fasten a nail.

“You think it’s good business to be delivering books in wet paper, or perhaps because you can’t read it doesn’t make a difference to you?” His voice sounded like it narrowly survived drowning in a subterranean cave, as though it had escaped by some mercy with the tide before being swallowed in undertow.

“I’m talking to you!” the shopkeeper insisted. Rickie’s mind, at this point, fled the conversation entirely. She had developed a way of going somewhere else when she was being treated as disposable. This man viewed her as no more human than the book he was

holding, or the counter on which he leaned - not intrinsically valuable for existing, but only to be considered in terms of what value she could provide to him. A tool to be used, and since she'd done her job poorly, he was verbally discarding her. As the man's lips writhed in slow motion, struggling to birth their next insult, she retreated entirely into herself.

Only now she wasn't alone. She could feel someone still there with her, but not the bookseller. She turned round and saw the woman standing there, looking at her with warm wonder. Her blonde hair was pulled up into a bun behind her head and held a long bodkin with what looked to be a luna moth on one end. Maybe sensing Rickie's confusion, the woman waved kindly. Before Rickie could give voice to her question, she was jerked from her hiding place.

"Really, that's enough," came a firm, resonant voice. The woman was standing in front of her now, palm down on the counter with a thin stack of bills beneath it. The full cheeks of the bookseller went pale as he realized his tirade had spectators.

"My apologies, ma'am, just some trouble with the help," he offered, his voice orienting towards customer service. Rickie smiled sourly on hearing the difference in tone. She thought the shopkeeper was a lowly bully, who relished misusing power on those beneath him.

"I'm not the ma'am you should be apologizing to," she curtly added, before leaving the bills on the counter and making for the door. Rickie stood still for a moment, feeling halfway vindicated, then hurried after her. The street was much quieter now, the boulevard less trafficked, and there were no whistles or clocks sounding to torment her. The woman was waiting for her, storing a few books away into a canvas shoulder bag. Seeing her in this light, Rickie thought she looked to be in her middle thirties. Under her heavy coat she looked like she was wearing a black velvet dress that went almost down to the laces of her boots. A leather belt of pouches cut across her waist. When she was finished, she looked at Rickie, and Rickie

looked back as she tried to piece together her question. She was rotten at starting conversations.

“I imagine you have a question,” the woman invited.

“I do.”

“I do too. Maybe we can compare notes, and teach each other?”

“Sure,” Rickie answered, curious. The woman smiled back.

“I’m Juliet, by the way.”

“Rickie. Not short for anything. Just Rickie.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Rickie,” she responded. Rickie didn’t like pleasantries, but something about Juliet made her feel she meant it.

“If I might ask, how did you get into the shop?”

“I opened the door.”

“You opened that door?” Juliet asked, pointing towards the door they’d just left. Her index finger had a simple silver ring on it.

“Yeah, of cour-” Rickie trailed off as she turned to look. She hadn’t opened that door. The door she’d found in the street looked different to it. They were both wood, but the first door was heavier, had a golden knob, and was cut with rectangular indentations that split the door into thirds. This door was a different color, with a brass knob and deadbolt, and was otherwise unassuming. She felt herself sweating. Turning to look down the street, she saw that the cafe she passed was no longer there. No smoke, no chatting socialites out to a late lunch or afternoon coffee. Perplexed, she turned back to Juliet. “No. Not that door. Must have been another door.”

Juliet smiled. “Walk with me, Rickie?” She turned east, away from the afternoon sun. Rickie followed next to her, and they rounded the block in silence. Charles Street gave way to a narrow alley, which they crossed, before turning parallel to Charles and walking down one block, turning twice more and walking back down Charles Street.

“There is another door, isn’t there?” Rickie asked.

Juliet was still in high spirits. “You just *appeared* before me. I was reading one moment, and then you were there. I don’t think our friend the bookseller realized.”

Rickie began to stammer a follow-up but failed to find the words. It was just unbelievable.

“When he was yelling at you, you went somewhere, didn’t you?” Juliet asked.

“Yes. I can tune people out really well, when they’re bothering me,” Rickie explained. “Only you were there this time.”

“I was. I’m sorry to intrude, also. Do you do that often?”

Rickie shrugged. “When I need to.”

“Have you ever met anyone else that can do that?”

“I mean, I’ve met plenty of people that don’t listen. But doesn’t everyone just have a happy place they go to? Isn’t that normal?” Rickie asked.

“That is normal, yes, but not in the way you think,” Juliet responded. “Say, I am making a huge imposition, and you do not need to say yes, but do you have plans this evening?”

Rickie looked towards the front door of the bookseller’s and felt her stomach turn. She rubbed the back of her neck, feeling the ends of her hair brush against her knuckles. “Well, I’m definitely fired, so I guess I can’t tell you I’ve got work.”

Juliet smiled, then spoke in a new, excited tone. “If you’d permit me, I’d like to talk to you some more. My place isn’t very far. I think I know what you are.”

“What I am?”

“Yes,” Juliet declared, “I think you’re just like me.”

Rickie, confused, looked Juliet over once more. “Confused?”

Juliet laughed. “A witch. I think you’re a witch- but wouldn’t you like to find out for sure?”

TWO

The sun was setting, and the complexion of the streets had changed. The crush of workers heading home had passed, and the tenements cast long, blocky shadows down the roads. Trolley wires crossed above Rickie's head like spider silk and every few minutes, one of their captive cars chugged along down the thoroughfare, a bug caught in the web. Rickie realized she was in a completely different part of the city than she'd been before running into Juliet, though she was still unsure of how. Juliet walked a pace in front of her, loose strands of her hair were occasionally caught by the breeze and swept about, catching the evening sunlight and appearing almost transparent.

Rickie worked up the courage to ask her most pressing question. "So, a witch? Like with the pointy hats, that my folks told me would steal me if I didn't do my chores?"

"The very same," Juliet responded, her tone warm.

"Like, the kind they burned, back when?"

Juliet stopped for a moment, causing Rickie to almost bump into her. She turned to face Rickie but looked through her more than at her.

"When people think of us, that's usually what comes to mind. Either a monster that steals children, or helpless little girls being persecuted," Juliet mused. "If they think of us at all. No one seems to talk about how...joyous it is to be a witch. Perhaps they haven't met one."

Rickie was silent while Juliet seemed to be a world away, for just a moment.

“Anyhow. I know you’ve got questions, but if you’ll bear with me for just a bit, I can explain everything. Or most everything. We’re almost there.”

Rickie nodded. She felt remarkably comfortable despite the circumstances. This detour with Juliet was keeping her mind from her other anxieties that would surely be running free in her mind were she alone. Meeting a “witch” seemed preferable to that.

Juliet turned down a side street, then another, and the paths went from four carts wide to two, down to one. Rickie felt herself growing claustrophobic from the shrinking space, she’d never liked being so closed in, though she’d learned to survive it. After another twist, she faced what looked to be a storefront. Two electric lamps buzzed on either side of a painted marquee with three moons above— one full, and one waxing or waning on either side. The storefront had no display windows, and the door was simple and flimsy looking. Juliet beckoned Rickie along as she let herself in.

The lavish interior contrasted with the homely edifice. Two plush lounges sat immediately inside, across from small tables stacked with papers and books. A mammoth workbench supported bottles, decanters, glass tubes of every size, and many brass gadgets that Rickie didn’t know the name for. The paneled walls were covered in thick, intricate draperies of many colors. Rickie heard the heels of her boots click against the tiled floor.

A man sat at the workbench and looked to be undisturbed by their entry. His wiry black hair cut a sharp widow’s peak down his forehead, and a pair of rectangular glasses perched perilously close to the end of his nose. Rickie thought his hazelnut-colored hands looked delicate and precise, like a clockmaker’s might, as they carefully affixed a label to a bottle and placed it gently to the side.

“Juliet, welcome in,” he said, sounding distracted and reaching for the next bottle. He peered up from behind his glasses and noticed, then, Rickie. “To you as well.”

“Oliver,” Juliet responded, doffing her jacket and holding it over one bent arm. “This is Rickie. Rickie, this is Oliver, clearly.” He raised a hand in greeting, Rickie nervously returned it.

“Is this a...new applicant?” Oliver mulled the last word very carefully, as though it would accompany him eternally.

“Of some considerable talent, yes.”

“You’ve seen her work?”

Juliet motioned to Rickie, who froze. “Would you tell my friend some of what you told me?”

Skittishly, Rickie did so. She played with her cuticles as she spoke, picking one down until it began to bleed. Oliver listened intently, but he did not look at her until she was done. When she finished there was a long silence, then Oliver shifted and looked at her, expressionless.

“When you opened the door, were you under some stress?”

“I was scared to death, actually.” Rickie forced a smile.

“When you...tune people out, as you put it, what does it feel like? What does it sound like?”

Rickie considered it for a moment. “It’s not like I’m relaxed, really, it’s like I’m more focused than I’ve ever been. There’s a rumble like a distant train in my ears. Things seem like they slow down, and I’m alone, even when I’m in a room full of people. It feels comfortable.”

“Does that happen when you’re under duress, upset, scared?”

“All of those times, yes.”

“Do you often feel like...it’s just too loud?”

“Constantly.”

“Do you sometimes feel an insecurity in your being that you can’t identify, can’t articulate?”

“If you mean I want to crawl out of my skin, well yeah,” Rickie replied, sardonic.

Oliver smiled, and to Rickie’s surprise it seemed to light up his rather grim face, from his exposed temples to his bearded chin. “Thank you for sharing, Rickie.”

“What do you think?” Juliet asked.

“I think she has a connection with the Skein, certainly. If she consents, I think it would be most prudent to give her some instruction, at the least.”

“I agree. Rickie, I’m sorry to talk about you like you aren’t present. Let me remedy that,” Juliet turned. “From what you’ve said, and what we’ve observed, you seem to have an innate magical ability. For those untrained, it’s common for these abilities to present themselves suddenly, without direction.”

Rickie was silent. She *was* different, or at least she’d been told she was enough times that she internalized it, made it part of herself. No one that told her she was different was ever interested in learning how she was different, or in making her feel like it wasn’t a detriment, an illness. She thought back, reaching for some examples of this conversation in her past- a time when someone presented, warmly, an attempt to understand how she was feeling. Depersonalized, she watched tears begin to well in what she knew to be her eyes, but she wasn’t there to feel them.

“Are you alright?” Juliet asked. She began to reach for Rickie’s arm but stopped herself. “It’s a lot to wrestle with.”

“I’m fine,” Rickie responded, quickly blinking and looking away, so as not to be seen as being emotional. Facing the wall, she continued. “It’s not even that, really. What you’re telling me is fantastic, and unbelievable, but I’ve seen it and experienced it. I got tired of explaining the feeling because it was just so foreign to everyone I tried to talk to. I was fine living with it...it’s just that no one’s ever told me that what I am is okay, before. No one’s tried to understand.”

Juliet smiled, sadly. “I’m sorry, and I promise you aren’t alone.”

“It’s not your fault,” Rickie managed, taking the sleeve of her coat to the tears and pretending like that would hide how she was feeling. She turned back to Juliet and Oliver. “So why are you talking

to me? Put me in a circus to do magic tricks?" she added with a lugubrious smirk.

"Feels like a circus round here, at times, but no," Oliver offered. His emotions didn't show on his face like they did Juliet's, but Rickie's comment put something approaching mirth in his voice. "I take it Juliet told you you're a witch?"

Rickie nodded.

"You really mustn't do that, you're going to scare people to death," Oliver lamented, towards Juliet.

"Well, someone must tell them, eventually" she responded in a mischievous tone. "It should be exciting."

"It is dangerous," Oliver scolded, "which brings me to my point. We're part of a small community of witches. We take care of one another, and we work together. I put you under no obligation to join us, whatsoever, but I would be most pleased to teach you to better understand and control your abilities."

"Dangerous?"

"The church doesn't burn witches, anymore, no," Oliver explained, "but that doesn't mean there aren't those that wish they did. What we possess is very...destabilizing," he drew the word out like it were a wad of chewing gum, "and discretion is sometimes necessary."

"Oliver likes to scare folks, too," Juliet piped up. "What he says is true, and I won't deny it. You are, of course, welcome to join us if you would like."

"Juliet likes to jump into everything, now," Oliver responded, "you sound like a traveling mystic with these pitches, let the girl breathe before you induce her."

"Yes. All of it. All that sounds nice," Rickie interrupted, nodding emphatically. "I can't tell you how much better this sounds than more courier work, which I've just been fired from, or more cleaning work. Definitely better than going back home to the farm. Let's do it."

Juliet and Oliver looked at one another, then back to Rickie. Oliver removed his glasses from their precipice on the tip of his nose and sat them down on the worktable. “Juliet, would you like to show her around? I can talk about theory and specifics later.”

“I would love to,” Juliet beamed. She hurried over to a door in the back corner of the room, it opened with a squeak. “Come along.”

Rickie followed. The door opened to a modest landing and a staircase heading steeply upwards. It was thin, much like the ones in the apartment where Rickie had been staying. She and Juliet couldn’t stand abreast if they wanted to. An electric bulb cast dim light down on the whole scene. Juliet flitted up the stairs, about a dozen, to another wooden door. This one, however, was decorated with a vast array of symbols neatly carved around its perimeter. There was no knob, but there was a mail slot in the center. Juliet flipped open the mail slot, and out slid a small metal tray, only as wide as two of Rickie’s fingers. Juliet dug into a pouch on her belt and produced a pinch of dried flowers and placed it, carefully, on the tray. With a match recovered from another pocket of her belt, she burned the flowers. A thin wisp of black smoke sauntered upwards through the air. Juliet spoke something quietly under her breath, and to Rickie’s amazement, the carvings along the edges of the door began to glow a deep amber color.

“Don’t be shocked,” Juliet warned, smiling, and flung open the door.

It opened onto the base of a grassy hill. In the fading light of an early spring evening, Rickie gazed out into a simple, natural splendor she hadn’t seen in some time. The still-short grasses, interspersed with dandelions, clovers, and poppies, swayed gently. A cloud of mayflies congregated overhead, and something told Rickie there’d be fireflies out tonight that she could watch. She stepped forward without a word. The air was warm, but fresh, and the breeze carried scents of the sea. Perhaps most importantly, it was quiet. There were no noises she couldn’t place, not the squeaking of wheels

nor the hissing of steam nor hurried footfalls on a staircase. Picking a place, she sat down, kicking her legs out and supporting herself with her arms as she let it all in.

Juliet sat beside her; legs folded underneath her. They sat silently for about a minute. “We’re only about an hour’s ride out of Wilhelmina. When you’re ready, the house is just over the top of the hill.”

Rickie roused herself to follow, hoping not to be rude. They crested the hill together, and below in a shallow valley was Juliet’s home. There was a stable, many rows of planters and what looked like a hothouse, and finally a house. Three stories tall with a gabled roof, its wooden shingles were painted yellow and green. Underneath the overhang of the roof, a thin row of colorful ceramic tiles ran the circumference. The windows were arched and wide with iron delicately running in between the panes and slanted wooden shutters. The door on the ground floor, which opened onto a wide porch that stuck out from the rest of the home, was rounded off and almost circular. The space above the awning was decorated with three symbols- a circle with a crescent moon off to each side.

“That’s the Three Goddesses,” Juliet explained, pointing. “We’ll tell you about that later. Are you feeling alright? Overwhelmed?”

“You must think I’m terribly bored,” Rickie explained, grinning, “but no, I’m fine. I think it’s enough for me to know that it is, rather than why it is.”

Juliet seemed pleased. “In time I think you’ll learn that too.”

She opened the door, which swung open into a huge common room. There were plush chairs, a sofa, a fireplace, bookshelves, lamps, and a slew of decorations. Stained glass baubles hung in windows that cast rainbows onto the wooden floor- the boards were clearly hand cut and stained; they weren’t like the machined boards in Rickie’s apartment. Candles and little statuettes littered the small tables and compact bookshelves, which were full to bursting. Paintings and sketches were so dense they made a collage of

the walls. In the corner, a spiral staircase led up, with dark wooden boards and an iron railing that swooped and dipped to look like swirling cumulus clouds. Rickie had never been in a room where so much intentionally existed. She found it quite pleasing.

“Tea room,” Juliet explained, floating along through to what Rickie interpreted as the kitchen. Drying herbs hung above a long wooden table with eight chairs. In a brick hearth sat a fat black pot that probably held five gallons. There was a more modern range along the wall as well, with pots and pans hanging from brass hooks.

“Here’s the kitchen,” Juliet added, “we try to eat together when we’re able - there’s the cauldron-

“-where you brew potions?” Rickie ventured, joking.

“No, where we cook. We brew potions in the workshop,” Juliet answered seriously. Seeing Rickie’s impish grin and realizing she’d been had, she added “go back to not asking questions, would you?”

Rickie laughed and doubled back to go up the staircase. The second story was a hallway, wide enough for two people to pass by unbothered. An open door at the eastern end revealed many apparatuses that resembled the ones Oliver was working at.

“The workshop is down there,” Juliet gestured, “we’ve also got a library here, a storage room, and then my room is over there.”

“What’s that door?” Rickie blurted out, gesturing down the hall at the door that hadn’t been indicated.

Juliet paused, sucking her teeth, and responded “ritual room. We sacrifice goats to our dark gods, then go dancing naked in the moonlight.”

Rickie’s expression paled and her eyebrows rose, taking another look at the door. Juliet chortled at her expense.

“It’s just Oliver’s room. I swear it.”

Rickie sighed with some amount of real relief.

“Upstairs are more rooms. Come on and I’ll show you yours.”

Rickie followed diligently. The top floor was similar to the second, only with a slanting ceiling. Juliet began down the hall and peaked into the first open door, smiling. Rickie followed. Inside, she saw a person about her age lounging on a bed, fully clothed. Laying on faer belly with faer nose in a book, Rickie could only see a ruffled mop of curly black hair.

“Alder! We have a guest.”

Alder looked up. Fae had circular, gold-rimmed glasses, two braids of black hair hanging on either side of faer square face, a button nose, and a crooked smile lighting up all of it. Fae waved excitedly.

“I’m Rickie, pleased to meet you,” Rickie added, the anxiety of first impressions setting in.

“I’m Alder! I like your boots,” Alder responded, faer voice squeaky with excitement. Rickie noticed fae were wearing chunky, almost military style boots, which swung back and forth as fae kicked faer feet in the air.

“Thank you!” Rickie responded, color rushing to her cheeks.

“Are Lavinia or Prosper in?”

“Think they’re out on a job,” Alder answered, “but to be honest I haven’t left my room today.”

Juliet frowned. “Have you had even one glass of water today?”

Alder paused, then replied “the day is long, and has time for many things.”

Juliet shook her head and turned to Rickie. “Come along, let’s get you settled.”

The pair walked down to the next door. Inside was a fair-sized bed on a sturdy wooden frame with a thick quilt, green and white striped. Several plump pillows accompanied it. There was a dresser, a mirror, an armchair, a washbasin, and a plush rug with floral patterns. On the far wall was a window, set in the slanted ceiling, which opened onto the roof.

“All this is mine?”

“It’s plain, and I know you don’t have your things with you,” Juliet began.

“It’s wonderful, really,” Rickie interrupted, smiling.

Juliet smiled back, sharing some of Rickie’s enthusiasm for the bedroom.

“Well, that’s that. Restrooms are down the hall, we’ve got plumbing. If you need anything, help yourself, or let me know. You can meet the others in the morning, and we can see about teaching you a thing or two about magic. Again, the door is open, and you can leave at any time...but I’m glad you’re here.”

Rickie wanted to express her gratitude, her excitement, and her relief. Unable to decide which would come first, she managed to smile and nod enthusiastically.

“I’ll let you get settled,” Juliet answered, gliding across the floor and closing the door behind her with a soft *click*.

Rickie plummeted onto the bed, face first. It was the most comfortable one she’d ever been able to call hers, even for a night. She stayed there for a few minutes, trying to let her mind catch up to all it had seen for the last few hours. Even then she struggled. She turned herself over languidly and cast her eyes towards the window. The sun had nearly set, and from this height she could see the sky turning an exuberant pink, with hints of a deep, thoughtful purple in the distance, past the hills.

Pulling herself from her feathery nirvana, she walked to the window and opened it gingerly. Looking out, she could begin to see the brighter stars above and hear the faint buzzing of insects in the fields below. She figured she could easily get onto the roof if she wanted, and that she did. Gripping the side of the window, she delicately tested her footing with one boot and found it solid. The other followed, and she was balancing on the roof comfortably. She pressed her back against the side and let herself slip down into a sitting position. Below, brief flashes of yellowish-green light from floating fireflies caught her attention. Her stomach felt like the wings of a moth were beating against every side, and noticing the sensation,

she sighed contentedly. She looked up and saw the stars begin to come into focus as the last light of day faded, with no lamps or streetlights to hide them. She watched the unblemished night sky roll past until she fell asleep.

Three

“Come on,” Rickie heard, “wake up then.”

She felt a firm prodding to her left knee. Opening her eyes, she saw someone staring down at her, hands on their hips. Based on the light, she guessed it was early morning. She blinked away the morning blariness in her eyes.

“I’m awake,” she offered, voice hoarse.

“Yes, and on the roof. Perhaps you’d like to come to breakfast, or will the birds be bringing seeds for you to share?” the stranger asked in an acidic tone, clearly finding the experience distasteful.

Frowning, Rickie stood and steadied herself. Satisfied, the stranger made for the open window, and Rickie followed. Once she’d successfully hauled herself back inside, noticing immediately how badly sleeping in that position hurt her knees and ankles, she ventured to ask questions.

“Are you, uh, Prosper?” Rickie asked.

“Yes,” she answered. Rickie finally got a better look at her. Her dark brown hair was pulled back in a tight braid that fell midway down her back. She wore a long, midnight blue dress with a laced-up bodice, long sleeves and loose cuffs, so that the sleeves seemed to fall away from her wrists elegantly. She was about Rickie’s height, so the cold glare from her eyes caught Rickie’s gaze squarely.

“I’m Rickie.”

“I’m aware.”

Rickie was taken aback at how poorly this was going, and decided it’d be better to court silence than try to salvage this first impression. She followed Prosper down the spiral stairs and into the kitchen, where the others were eating.

Alder looked up from faer plate and waved at Rickie. She noticed fae was sitting crumpled up, head resting on faer knees and feet in the seat of the chair. Rickie waved back. Oliver was at the sink, the sleeves of his starched shirt rolled above the elbows. Juliet, at the head of the table, smiled warmly as the two walked in.

The last diner, the one Rickie hadn't met, had a shock of curly orange hair that went mostly upward, the sides were shaved almost to the skin. Caught mid-bite, she put one hand over her mouth and tried to smile at Rickie with only her hazel eyes. Rickie thought they were stunning, but quickly looked away.

"Good morning! How did you sleep?" Juliet asked.

"I found her on the roof," Prosper interjected, taking a seat with a very measured air about her movements. Rickie looked away nervously.

"Quite well. I hadn't slept under the stars in...well since I moved to Wilhelmina about a year ago."

"Do be careful not to fall," Oliver cautioned, "at least until I teach you a protection spell for that."

"That's so fun, we should all try that sometime," Alder suggested, mouth not quite finished with faer last bite of scone. "Maybe get a blanket, sit out on the hills?"

Rickie agreed that would have been the smarter idea, had she put any thought into it. Maybe her knees wouldn't ache quite so badly. She grabbed a crescent-shaped pastry from the center of the table, gave it a warm blanket of butter, and ate greedily.

"I think we're all on business today," Juliet began. "Oliver, you're selling tonics?"

"Indeed. I thought I might take Rickie along with me. It's nicer with the company, and we can cover some theory in the meantime."

Rickie realized that she had never bothered to ask what exactly this house of witches *did*.

"What's business mean? Like, do you do magic for money?" She caught Prosper rolling her eyes beside her.

“We do many things,” Juliet said. “In the past, witches could live on the respect of their community, healing the sick, protecting the weak, being taken care of in turn. Today there are more hoops to jump through.”

“Capitalism and centuries of being demonized will do that-” Alder began.

“Not even finished with your breakfast and you’re on about capitalism,” Prosper sneered at Alder.

The girl with orange hair spoke up in Alder’s defense. “You know it’s never too early to be passionate about something.”

“To my point-,” Juliet interrupted, voice firm, “we still cast spells for the good of our communities, only in different ways. It helps fill in the gaps where we can’t provide for ourselves, either with magic or our resourcefulness.”

“Likewise, as industry grows, more people will accept it as true without knowing how it works,” Oliver added, pensively. “What we do looks like miracles to some, but science to most. It looks like witchcraft to even fewer- which is most convenient.”

There was a pause, and Rickie felt like she was beginning to understand. Hiding in plain sight didn’t seem like much of a stretch to her, her months living in the city had shown her a new, impersonal side of folks. Anonymity was normal.

“Anyhow, I’m lecturing. I’ll tell you more on the way.”

Rickie rode shotgun in the carriage as Oliver spurred on the two dray horses. The morning air was wet and unseasonably warm, the sky cloudless. The road was well-kept, but still made of packed dirt, not the pavement or stone of the cities. They passed tilled fields of wheat, corn, trellises of beans, and a few pastures with goats and cows. She felt the sun on her skin, uninhibited, and she felt made anew. She’d missed the feeling of being *out*, away from the loud noises, the crush of people, the hurry of urban life. She hadn’t missed other parts of the country, for sure, but those parts weren’t present either. For the time being she was unabashedly pleased. In the

distance, she could see Wilhelmina rising in front of her. In her hands, she turned over a small amber bottle, perhaps large enough to hold half a glass of water. Secured with a cork and a drop of wax, the label was adhered on a bit crookedly. It read “Three Goddess Miracle Tonic.” Like the witches’ home, it also had the motif of a full moon with a crescent to each side.

“You sell snake oil?” she asked, finally.

Oliver was visibly amused. “You wound me. We’re actually the only ones *not* selling snake oil.”

“You mean it works?”

“Of course it works. The water is sanctified under the light of a full moon, infused with powerful herbs, and refined from there. It functions as a protection spell, mixed with a bit of self-love and rejuvenation,” Oliver explained, as though his description would elicit an easy affirmative from his audience. “It wasn’t my idea, there’s been traveling miracle workers throughout history, naturally. It just so happens ours are at least a bit miraculous.”

“I’ve seen hawking peddlers in the town square back home, in three-piece suits and spitting ten-dollar words. My dad always told me they were snakes - too clever to do an honest day’s work.”

“And you’re none too excited about joining their ranks?”

“It’s not that-” Rickie responded, searching for the words to match her feelings, “it’s just a lot to unlearn, I guess.”

“I empathize. Being a witch is a lot to unlearn for most people,” Oliver added, glancing over to the girl. “Even when you aren’t selling snake oil. If you’d like, feel free to drink that one.”

Rickie took another look at it, turning it once more in her fingers like she’d find something new in this viewing. Shrugging, she cracked the wax seal with her nail and uncorked it. The concoction tasted like pine needles and orange peel, and she grimaced as it passed over her tongue. She sat for a moment, then stretched her legs. The pain in her legs was dissipating quickly.

She turned to Oliver, who looked at her knowingly. “Good snake oil?”

"Top shelf," she laughed.

They rode in silence for a few minutes.

"So, we've some time before we make it to market. Care to learn a bit about magic?"

Rickie nodded enthusiastically.

Oliver reached into his satchel and produced a wound coil of yarn, black. "We refer to magic, or its form, as the Skein. It functions similarly to this."

He placed the skein down on the bench between them.

"The Skein has a structured end," Oliver indicated, pulling from one end of the fabric, "and a disordered end." He then pulled from the other end of the skein, which took more effort and unraveled the tidy oval of yarn a bit. "When you use runes, verbal components, or materials, you pull from the structured end of the Skein. You get more predictable results, in terms of effect, duration, and intensity. That's how you make something like a potion, generally."

"So, the way I've been using it, when I tune out or I open doors, I'm going through the disordered end. Is that bad?"

"Not necessarily," Oliver reassured. "Magic is everywhere, and in many individuals that don't yet know how to use it. That magic is quite powerful, and tends to be guided more by feelings, and urgency. It kept you safe at times, did it not?"

"It did."

"Quite right. That comes at the cost of being less dependable, less consistent. For a seasoned witch, it's often better to pull on the tidy end of the Skein- but never forget your connection to the Skein is to *all* of it- even the messy bits."

Rickie nodded.

"A question. I always assumed witches worshiped something. Maybe not the devil, but *something*. Is that true?"

"Many of us do," Oliver explained, "All cultures have magic, and all cultures have a way of understanding it. Sometimes that includes a god, or a goddess, or three goddesses, what have you.

Some of us burn incense at our altars and give our thanks to the Skein, to the moon, to something. I don't know if it's this age of empiricism we live in, or if I'm just naturally a skeptic, but I choose not to." Oliver shrugged. "I don't think I've offended anyone yet."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"I take comfort in knowing about my people. I suppose witches are the only people I've really felt at home around. My interest in our quirks, our beliefs, is entirely cultural. It keeps me connected with others though I don't emphatically believe in it myself."

Rickie kept that thought for a while. It initially seemed disingenuous to her to be connected through something that she herself didn't believe in, but she understood the need to be connected to something. As they rode, the path widened, and at the crest of a hill flanked by cow pastures she saw sprouting in the distance a little township. Two slender rows of buildings in red and brown brick, she could see advertisements painted on the sides of a few but couldn't make them out. A river sprinted by the east side of the town, thin but fast. Carriages now passed by them with more regularity.

They entered the town, which was called Greta's Mill, Rickie learned. Like most towns that popped up in the sticks, the name was opaque to all but those who had been there at the time, who were now all long dead. There was no sign of Greta or a mill, but there was a pharmacy, a butcher, a sundry provisioner, an ice cream parlor, a barber, and a few administrative buildings. Even more, it had power lines, showing how far Wilhelmina's industry was now able to stretch. It was clearly a market day, as there were other stands and stalls further down in the hemispheric town square, and carts with early-season vegetables, woven baskets, nails and other metalworking, and other ephemera. Oliver slowed the horses to a walk, and stopped the cart in a space along the outer ring. Slinking off the driver's bench, he hitched the horses near enough to a water trough.

"Rickie, could you get their feed bags? I'll set-up shop."

“Right!” This work wasn’t as mystical as she’d expected, but Rickie did genuinely enjoy being helpful. She got the horses settled and fed as Oliver opened the side window on the carriage, propped it, and began assembling bottles for distribution.

To Rickie’s surprise, they were immediately beset by customers. The first was an elderly woman, dressed in finery in the way that the older generations often overdressed for occasions, with a fine teakwood cane supporting her.

“Mr. Oliver! I went to my doctor this week, and I swear he’s never fixed me up quite right, not once. A swig of your tonics and I’m right as rain,” she declared emphatically, her wrinkled hand passing a bill up to Rickie, which she took. She tentatively looked at Oliver as to how many bottles that sum had purchased.

“Now Miss Yvonne, listen to your doctor. He’s a smart man,” Oliver cautioned, smiling and delicately handing her a tonic. Rickie noticed that his voice wasn’t the same- it was inflected, deeper, casting more broadly than it usually did. Oliver turned to her briefly and gave a shallow shrug. More customers came and went, and Rickie was diligently changing bills for bottles with Oliver’s help.

After maybe half an hour, a man approached the carriage. He had a tan flat cap and a black jacket above a pinstripe vest. He was on the taller side, with a face that hadn’t quite shed all its baby fat.

“If I may ask, what is in your tonic?” he asked in a probing, inquisitive voice. To Rickie, he sounded like Oliver’s false voice, like a newsie selling papers.

Oliver’s response was guarded. “Well, I wouldn’t be a good businessman to go giving away my recipe.”

“Pardon me my impropriety, I’d just like to know how it *works*, my good sir,” the man responded.

“It’s magic,” Rickie piped up, smiling. Oliver glanced over to her with concern, only for the truth to go right over the nosy stranger’s head.

Smiling in a hollow way, he took off his cap to reveal his black hair, trimmed short, held in place with pomade. Patronizingly,

he said “that’s a good one, miss! Spoken like a true salesman.” Extending his hand up to her, she reached out to shake it. He gripped her daintily, as though her hand was a flower, and Rickie frowned. He’s the kind of man that thinks a woman a prop, and not a person, she concluded.

“I’m Elijah Friason,” he said, “pleasure to meet you both. I’m a journalist by trade, but I have a special interest in these medical miracles of late. It’s important to me that the good folks of Wilhelmina know what they’re consuming.”

“A fine endeavor, Mr. Friason,” Oliver responded, taking a bottle off the window counter in front of him and quaffing it. Knowing what the potion tasted like, Rickie was impressed he didn’t spit it back out. With an exaggerated expression of pleasure, he declared “I assure you my potions are pure, and I drink them myself. Now would you like one yourself, or are you just going to hold up my line?”

Elijah smiled curtly, nodded, and responded “good day to you both.” He turned on the heel of a black leather dress shoe and stomped off.

The rest of the workday passed uneventfully. Rickie stacked empty crates in one corner of the carriage for re-use, their worn wooden planks already cracking in places. Oliver readied the horses. It was a little past midday, and the other peddlers were packing up what remained of their wares and counting their income.

Oliver beckoned to Rickie, and she hurried out of the trailer, latching the black-painted double doors behind her. She climbed atop the carriage as Oliver coaxed the horses homeward.

“You did very well,” he assured. His voice was back to normal but sounded a little hoarse from hawking and crying. “I hope that doesn’t sound patronizing.”

Rickie smiled. “Do you get many folks like that newsie?”

Oliver sucked on his teeth, then answered. “Only occasionally. I don’t blame him, necessarily, he’s only heard bad things about what he thinks we are.”

“That’s not what we are. We aren’t grifters.”

“He’s only heard worse about witches,” Oliver added.

“Perhaps it is someone’s responsibility to educate him, but he must be ready to learn. You told him the absolute truth, and he thought you were playing him for a fool.”

Rickie smirked. “Well, our potions really are magic, and he really is a fool.” This got a laugh out of Oliver, and Rickie felt just a little bit accomplished.

Once they returned home, Rickie helped Oliver tend to the horses in a small stable that sat some small ways from the cottage. Rickie’s childhood had made her good with animals, and they responded well to her even though she’d never handled these two before. Once they were taken care of, Oliver dismissed her.

Rickie paced back to the house and entered through the kitchen door. The girl she hadn’t been introduced to was inside and tending to a teapot atop the range. When she turned to face Rickie, her thick, curly strands of orange hair jumped for joy and fell back onto her forehead.

“Hey! I’m Lavinia. Would you like some tea?” Her voice felt like sunshine, soft and bright.

Rickie smiled and nodded.

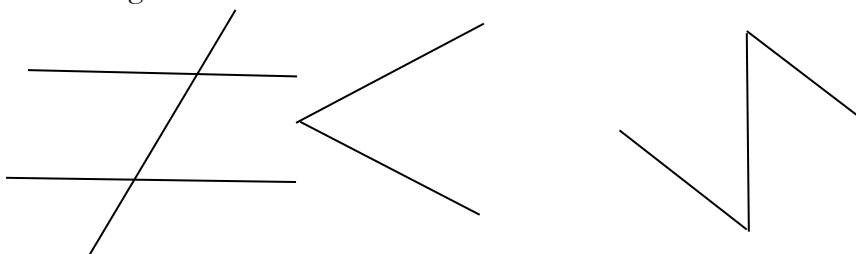
“Come on over then,” she beckoned. Rickie hurried over. In the open cupboard above her were an assortment of tins with handwritten labels.

“Pick your favorite,” Lavinia crouched down and opened the fuel grate. Inside were branches arranged in a crossed star, with pine needles sprinkled atop. A small handful of marionberries were scattered around as well. Lavinia slid the tray back into the stove, satisfied.

“I don’t know that that’ll be enough,” Rickie expressed. Lavinia laughed.

“Come watch,” Lavinia explained, and Rickie stooped next to her, curious. With a piece of chalk, she scratched three symbols onto

the metal grate.



Closing her eyes, Lavinia put the index finger of both hands on either side of her seal, and mouthed a string of words Rickie didn't understand. Rickie heard the fire ignite and instantly felt the heat emanating from the stove. Lavinia wiped the soot from her fingertips off on her trousers.

"That'll burn until we wipe away the seal," she declared, satisfied.

Rickie was stupefied. "Can I do that?"

"I'm sure you could learn," Lavinia declared most confidently, standing up to dig through the tea selection. "Do you like herbal teas?"

"More of a coffee gal," Rickie admitted.

"We can do that too." Lavinia worked quickly, and shortly had two cups steaming in front of them. The tableware was mismatched, Rickie's an earthenware mug and Lavinia's a floral, blue teacup.

"What's it like here?" Rickie asked, blowing on the surface of her coffee and making a whirlpool.

"It's really nice," Lavinia answered. "We work about four days a week. Sometimes we work on selling potions with Oliver, or we work in the greenhouse where we grow our components, or- and these are my favorites- we do special assignments."

"Special assignments?"

"Yes," she took another sip of tea, holding the cup gingerly with two fingers, "there's many practical applications for magic. Our spells can go a long way to making someone's life easier."

"Are you ever worried about being caught?"

“We have to be discrete, a lot of the time, when working with regular people.”

“There’s a lot of dishonesty in being a witch,” Rickie mused.

Lavinia shrugged her shoulders and put her palms towards the ceiling. “If we didn’t have to lie, we wouldn’t. It’s not all bad though, sometimes we get to work with other witches- or people that know about magic, at least. That’s really nice.”

“That does sound nice.” Rickie set down her mug, watching the black brew swirl around the cup and settle. “I don’t know the first thing about it, so maybe I shouldn’t consider myself in with you all-”

“Don’t be silly. Everyone starts knowing nothing, then they learn something. We all learned after we got here. We’re all still learning, really. I think the only one that could write their runes before they got here was Prosper.”

“I don’t think she likes me.”

“She doesn’t like anyone,” Lavinia responded, giving a beaming smile. She had prominent front teeth with a uniform gap between the front two. “She came from a very rich family, and I think she has a hard time relating to people. She’ll get used to you.”

Rickie smiled at the thought. Prosper aside, this was the warmest welcome she’d had anywhere.

“What’s it feel like to do magic? I guess I’ve never done it intentionally.”

“It starts in your head,” Lavinia explained. “If you can clear your mind, even most of the way, you can start to feel it. It’s a dull thrum, it usually feels like it’s beneath my feet. Once you find it, you need to focus on it. Not tightly, necessarily, but just acknowledge its presence, let it flow, and do as it will while you find its outline.”

Rickie closed her eyes, gave a deep breath, and focused as best she could. She found herself distracted by everything- the sound of the fire burning in the range, the scent of rose hips coming from Lavinia’s cup, the edge of the wooden chair digging into her thighs.

“This is difficult,” she laughed.

“You’re not supposed to be good at it on your first try.”

She began shutting the door on her distractions, focusing on her breath for longer and longer. A second, a few seconds, half a minute. It felt like how she had tuned out the bookseller yesterday, and once she connected that, it became easier to manage. She did it intentionally, retreating in more and more. As it went on, she realized she felt something else there with her. It felt like her pulse, outside of her but also within her. When she noticed, she exclaimed and broke her own concentration.

“You felt it!” Lavinia praised.

“I did,” Rickie responded, half surprised.

Her excitement was interrupted by footsteps and a long yawn. Alder walked into the kitchen; arms stretched above faer head. Fae gave Lavinia a quick wave and made for the kettle.

“Did you take a nap?” Lavinia asked, feigning incredulity.

“I was tired!”

“It’s barely past lunch.”

“We worked hard today,” Alder defended, sleepily. Fae poured water into another mug and pulled up a chair next to Rickie. Seeing that Rickie was still in the outfit she’d worn last night, Alder spoke up.

“If you need someone to help collect your things, I can come with you.”

“Oh,” Rickie responded, embarrassed, “it’s nothing I’m attached to. Just hand-me-downs and make-do things.”

“Well, you’ll need a wardrobe,” Lavinia suggested, concerned. Rickie took a longer look at her and Alder. Alder’s business shirt was ornately patterned with a stiff collar that fae wore open, with black suspenders holding up sharp dress pants. Charms hung off the frame of faer glasses in the shape of stars. The shoulders of Lavinia’s blouse were puffed; blue and white pinstripes carried down her frame. A black ribbon was tied loosely around her neck. Rickie took an inventory of herself and felt acutely homely.

“It’s not something I ever thought about, really,” she flushed.

“Not to be reductive, but looking the part is part of the fun,” Alder laughed.

“I was expecting pointier hats,” Rickie joked.

“Only on the sabbath,” Lavinia responded tersely, face serious, before breaking into a laugh.

Once their laughter died down, Alder spoke.

“It’s settled then, we’re going shopping for Rickie. I’ll tell Oliver?”

Lavinia rose from the table and brought her cup to the sink. Rickie followed Alder outside. He proved easy to find, walking over the small hill between the stable and the house, jacket draped over one shoulder.

“Oliver! A most terrible emergency.”

Oliver was disbelieving and unenthused. “Pray tell.”

“Rickie has simply *no* outfits which make her feel like a witch. She can’t stay in that one, it’s unbecoming.”

“Not to mention unsanitary,” Oliver mumbled. “I suggest you take her to Marta’s. Ae still owes us for those needles last month, see if you can get it on balance.”

Alder did a little jump, but Rickie felt more stunned than anything. She’d successfully buried this desire, like many others, and to have it revived and fulfilled all at once was overwhelming.

“Don’t sell the farm,” Oliver instructed, passing the two and making for the house.

“I swear. Can we take the circle?”

“Of course.”

In ten minutes, Alder, Lavinia and Rickie had gathered at the stone circle that Rickie arrived at the day before. Inspecting it now, Rickie realized how intentional the installation was. Each stone was carved with precise runes, like the ones Lavinia had shown her earlier, but a much wider range. There seemed to be a dozen different ones, and they were coordinated in some way to the kind of stone they were placed on. Lavinia reached into a pouch on her waist and produced a pinch of dried flower petals, placing them on a central

stone, like an offering to a small dais. Alder lit them with a match and muttered a few words.

The door came abruptly into existence. Rickie expected some kind of sound, a puff of smoke, but there was no fanfare; the door simply *was*. Lavinia nudged Rickie gently with her elbow.

“You first.”

Rickie took a deep breath, reminded herself she’d been doing this for her whole life without realizing it, and stepped through the door.

She was back in the cramped stairwell. It was dark, as the electric lights were off, and it took her eyes time to adjust. Alder bumped into her back and reminded her she still had to walk. She took the steps one at a time, fumbling for a switch or pull cord to illuminate the place, and eventually found it at the bottom of the stairs.

“One day we’ll remember to leave that on,” Lavinia lamented with a grin. She sidled past Rickie and opened the door to the workshop. Afternoon light managed to cut through gaps between curtains and gave the room some life, if only to illuminate specs of dust that flitted freely in the air.

Once Rickie stepped outside, she was hit with a sensory wall. There was a whistle sounding somewhere nearby. The hiss of steam rising from manholes nearby, the smell of garbage uncollected. It wasn’t unbearable, but it was uncomfortable. Alder noticed it immediately.

“It’s too loud, isn’t it? I always hated that. Makes it hard to hear yourself, or the Skein.”

Rickie nodded. “I’ll be alright, it’s not too much.”

“We don’t let our friends suffer here,” Lavinia insisted, marching to one of the shelves along the back wall and searching for something. Satisfied, she turned towards the workbench with a small glass jar in hand. Rickie watched her combine something herbal with what smelled like alcohol until it formed a green paste about the

color of algae collecting on a stagnant pond. Lavinia took some in both hands and turned to Rickie.

“May I touch you?”

Rickie felt herself blushing, then hurriedly nodded in the affirmative.

Lavinia reached to either side of Rickie’s face. She closed her eyes and spoke a few words Rickie didn’t understand, then rubbed the paste onto Rickie’s neck, below her ears. Initially uncomfortable, she noticed immediately as the background noise faded out.

“Is that better?” Lavinia asked, her voice now sounding like it had an echo to it.

“Absolutely,” Rickie responded. Her own voice sounded like it came from inside her head. “Things sound different, but I can’t hear all the din.”

“Spell’s still missing something,” Lavinia sighed, her perfectionism keeping any satisfaction safely out of her reach, “but I’m glad it mostly works.”

“Thank you, also,” Rickie insisted. “It’s really wonderful.”

Lavinia returned half a smile.

“Marta’s isn’t far,” Alder interjected. Lavinia opened the front door and dug around in a pocket to be sure she had the key. Stepping out into the streets of Wilhelmina with the protection of Lavinia’s spell, Rickie felt renewed confidence. She wondered if this was how everyone else experienced the city, but tried not to dwell on it. She’d always attributed her angst to not being from the city, and hadn’t considered the problem wasn’t her taste.

The trio clung close together, Lavinia leading. They were shortly in a boutique section of the city, which Rickie recognized from several courier tasks that had taken her there. The streets were divided with a green meridian, with trees and shrubs behind decorative black iron fencing. Streetlights were ornamental rather than purely utilitarian. The feminine walked with parasols though there was no rain, the masculine with canes though they had no disability to speak of. It was the excess which the cream of

Wilhelmina's crop were so fond of, and Rickie always found profoundly silly.

Marta's was up a short, flowing marble staircase from street level- it felt like walking up a fine curtain blustering in the breeze. The front facade was mostly windows with some stylized advertising text sweeping across in curly cues. The foyer was bright and open, a check stand stood on the far side with two cashiers hurriedly making change with bulky, brass cash registers. Behind them, twin staircases led to a partial second story. Rickie's boots clicked on the black-and-white tile flooring.

Like lightning in a summer storm, the proprietor was upon the trio. With almost-white hair swept back from aer forehead, a single spectacle on the right eye, and a tape draped over the shoulder, ae approached with long and particular strides.

"How *wonderful* to see you, darlings, it has been too long!" ae clasped aer hands together as though clapping. Rickie ignored that ae had never seen her.

"Here for some shopping," Alder responded, infected with Marta's enthusiasm, "we've got a new friend in dire need of threads."

"I'm Rickie, it's a pleasure," she recited.

Marta's attention turned to Rickie, and ae seemed to take an inventory of her in a moment, peering over aer spectacle.

"Yes, absolutely. Forgive me, but this paperboy chic does not become you, friend," Marta concluded, pulling the measuring tape from aer shoulder. "Fear not, I'll have you fitted like royalty before you leave. These are dear, dear friends and we do not let friends walk around in clothing so...incongruent."

Rickie flashed a worried look towards Lavinia, as if to ask if ae were always like this. Lavinia shrugged her shoulders and shot back a smile.

A man in a three-piece suit interrupted, a worried expression visible under the walrus mustache. "Pardon me Sir, I've been waiting for this appointment for some time."

Marta turned to the intruder, wroth, “and you will wait fifteen minutes more, then I shall be right with you. This is a dire emergency; can you not see it?” After gesturing vaguely to Rickie, the businessman appeared mollified. Rickie raised her eyebrows, wondering if her outfit were really *that* bad.

“We’ll be browsing if you need us,” Alder declared, already making fair way to one of the gallery rooms. Marta turned on a heel, seemingly expecting Rickie to follow her. Rickie sheepishly complied.

The fitting room had a rack with an assortment of garments ready in different fabrics, colors, and cuts. Light streamed in from the foyer through two windows placed high on the wall, above the eyeline of anyone who might peek in. Marta closed the door behind her delicately and made for a desk with a small assortment of needles, amongst other tools.

“Are you new to the coven, Rickie?” Marta asked, sizing up her implements.

Rickie was taken aback, mouth opening and closing without answering.

“Don’t be scared, this is a safe space,” Marta rambled, “you’re not the only witch in the room, darling. Yes, I sell clothes to everyone, but I *make* them for witches, see? No one else appreciates what we go through to create.”

Rickie nodded empathetically. “Yes, I’m very new. I came in yesterday.”

“Making clothes for a newborn!” Marta declared, smiling. “How exciting. Have you ever had clothes that really fit?”

“I’d say so?”

“Not just clothes you can wear, Rickie,” Marta clarified, “may I size you?”

Rickie nodded.

As Rickie stood, Marta delicately wrapped the tape around her in a few places. Rickie tried not to breathe. Marta had more

theatrics than she knew how to process, and she resolved to ride out the storm as politely as she could.

“Not just clothes you can wear,” Marta began again, “clothes that fit. Clothes that make you feel like you, clothes that *are* you.”

Rickie snickered. “I don’t know if clothes can be me. I’m me, the clothes are just clothes.”

“Sincerely, Miss Rickie, you’ve never worn anything that fits. You’ve never worn a Marta.” Marta threaded a needle at her desk, walked to the rack, and let it loose mid-air. The needle began moving of its own accord, stitching into and out of a black dress. Rickie gasped.

“You must have a black dress, frankly, no self-respecting femme should be caught without one, witch or not. Now, what other colors are we working with?”

Rickie looked up and down the rack, overwhelmed with her options.

“Don’t overthink, tell me the first colors that come to your mind.”

“Lavender. Blue, baby blue.”

“Fantastic choices!” Marta declared. After a brief inspection, one more needle began working away at a garment, and Marta brandished a seam-ripper to adjust another. “I’ll be fifteen minutes, at most. I require perfect silence. You’re welcome to sit.”

Rickie nodded, bewildered, and watched the needles work-like hummingbirds around a flower; they vibrated, then darted in and out of a stitch, trailing thread. Move as they may, they never got themselves entangled. She thought about how intricate the spell to create such a thing must be. Marta worked chaotically, tossing down discarded tools, spools, and pieces of fabric. It was rather noisy - perfect silence seemed not to apply to her.

Marta finished, gave an exaggerated sigh, and made for the door. “The three on the desk, please try them on. I will gather some essentials.” As she opened the door just a smidge and squeezed out, leaving Rickie with the attire.

Marta had adjusted a silk, lavender blouse with white pinstripes, which Rickie found fit her exactly. It was opaque enough that nothing beneath it showed, but light and airy feeling. For blue, Marta had adjusted a floor-length dress, with a cinched bodice and a pleated skirt. It laced up in the front and left only a modest amount of skin. Rickie was amazed at how well it defined her silhouette; in the floor-to-ceiling mirror she saw curves she wasn't aware she had. Delighted, she gave a little spin and led the skirt *whoosh* around her, before pausing and giving her best impression of a curtsy to the mirror. Giggling, she inspected the black dress.

Rickie reckoned it was the most elegant thing she'd put her hands on. The skirt had two layers to it, with a soft cotton inner lining. The sleeves had lace cuffs that protruded like the neck of an exotic reptile. The collar likewise had a lace perimeter, and running up and down the dress was filigree stitched in silver thread, only apparent when the light caught it. For as much garment as it was, it felt natural to wear, neither squeezing nor hanging off of her.

A knock at the door. "Are we decent, Miss Rickie?"

"Better, in fact."

Marta opened the door, holding in her hands a bundle of clothes. She deposited them before Rickie- undershirts, a few pants, bras, underwear, stockings in many colors, and some white gloves.

"The essentials. You'll forgive me because I lack the time to cut them to you exactly, your credit is extensive, but my time is quite limited. I trust everything fits?"

"Actually, I was wondering if you might take this in a bit," Rickie began, watching with pleasure as Marta's eyebrows rose like a balloon. She laughed and waved her hand, to Marta's visible relief.

"Everything is perfect, Marta. Thank you."

"Splendid, I will allow you to leave with nothing less. I do have a request, if you'll indulge me."

"Yes?"

"Dispose of that outfit you came in with. It is tragic," Marta said, gravely serious. Rickie only gulped and nodded.

“Now excuse me, I must fit the world’s least-patient accountant to a suit. I hope my measuring tape doesn’t choke his ego,” Marta explained, tugging on aer measuring tape from both ends and making a snapping sound. Rickie laughed, and hurriedly changed into fresh bits, and the blue dress, packing everything else into two white boxes.

She caught up with her friends as Lavinia was counseling Alder on prudence, and the virtues of not buying an entire wing of the store. Alder noticed her first.

“Gods damn,” fae muttered, making Lavinia snicker.

Lavinia put up her hand and snapped her approval as Rickie giggled and twirled once, letting the dress spin around her.

“Do you feel the part?” Lavinia asked.

“I feel something, definitely,” Rickie explained, clutching the boxes a little closer to her chest.

“Ready to go home?”

For the first time, Rickie associated the coven house with home. “Let’s.”

Four

“You’ve found it?” Juliet asked.

Rickie nodded. Her concentration was improving rapidly. At first, she could only feel the vague presence of the Skein, but now with a few weeks of practice she was able to find it specifically, note where it changed course and feel its pulse. It was practically in her stomach now, alive with movement that made her almost nauseous. Her eyes were open and straining to focus on the small tent of sticks in front of her. The formula of the spells was inscribed on a piece of agate, clutched in her hand.

“Say it.”

Speaking the words of an incantation, when successfully done, did not feel like talking. The muscles inside the throat had to be carefully considered - Rickie focused on her upper larynx, controlled her breath, and named the spell. Its title buzzed across her tongue and came to life, bright and clear.

“Kaulan”

The agate smoldered in her hand. The sticks were engulfed, licks of orange flame reaching for the sky around them.

“Excellent job!” Juliet congratulated her. “You’ve gotten so much better.”

Rickie sighed with relief. “I couldn’t have gotten any worse.”

“Don’t discount yourself. You could have stagnated, done nothing with it. That was always a possibility. Give yourself a little credit.”

Rickie smiled slightly, then pushed the hair out of her face and stood up. “Thanks.”

Juliet beamed. The morning sun beat down from above and the spring air was heavy and wet, and Rickie was sweating. They were

outside the house, in a clear area near the stable. Oliver and Alder had gone on a sales run that morning, and the space was empty.

“Let’s work on your protection spells- we’ll be setting you loose on special assignments in no time.”

Juliet had prepared a small canvas for Rickie. Taking a piece of chalk, Rickie inscribed her markings, then reached for her component pouch. Sandalwood, lavender petals, a chunk of moonstone. Deep breaths, clearing her mind, finding her source and letting it fill her attention like water running down a gorge. Her left hand touching the canvas, the right grasping her components, she declared her incantation. It had a physical feeling- her fingers tingled, her muscles tensed, it felt like she conducted the magic through her body into her runes.

“Very good,” Juliet encouraged. “Stand back and allow me to test it.”

Rickie stood and took a few paces back. Juliet approached and prepared her own fire ritual. The ground around the canvas ignited in a shallow ring of fire- shape was a nuance Rickie had not yet picked up - and Rickie watched nervously as the flames closed on her ward. A minute passed, and Juliet struck through her runes, breaking the spell. She bent close to inspect the canvas.

“Pretty good- there’s some burning on the corners, but it’s mostly intact.”

Rickie let out a grudging sigh that hissed through her front teeth.

“You’re improving, Rickie.”

“Thank you. I just want to be good enough to help.”

Juliet gave her a pat on the shoulder. “You are not a burden here, Rickie. Your productivity is not your worth. You can help with more things when you are ready, and there is not a deadline on that.”

Rickie nodded, comforted. “Thank you, Juliet.”

Rickie knelt, digging through the soil, as the morning sun beat down. As spring turned towards summer, it became hotter earlier and

earlier in Wilhelmina, and Rickie found herself wiping her brow every minute. Lavinia was with her, wisely keeping her hair back with a handkerchief, picking around for weeds and other undesirables. Rickie weighed in her head whether she could reach for Lavinia's hand and make it look like an accident, like some comedy routine.

"Did you do this a lot growing up?" Lavinia asked, straining. "You're really fast."

Rickie shook herself out of the daydream. "Yeah, my family were farmers. Probably still farmers. Spent a lot of time weeding our vegetable boxes and our cornrows"

"Huh," Lavinia mused, "I want to ask, but I don't have to, if it's sore for you."

"You can ask."

"You're happy to see the back of them, aren't you?"

Rickie grinned. "I never really got along with my father."

"Mean?"

"Terribly. I didn't realize it until I got older, but his coping mechanism was taking out his failures on his children. Well, that and drinking. For a while you think it's normal, you know? You only have one father and that's how he is, so that must be how all fathers are."

"I understand," Lavinia reassured. Distracted, they sat and ignored their task for the moment.

"He always told me when he was a teenager, he joined the legion to get away from his father. They don't let girls in the legion, so I left for the city," Rickie laughed. Struggling with eye contact most of her life, right now Lavinia's thoughtful eyes were all Rickie could focus on.

Lavinia smiled. "For me, my mother was strong-willed. So much so she decided to leave with a new husband when I was about ten. My father didn't take that very well and got too caught up in bottles to care for us. I did most of the cooking and caretaking."

"For us?"

Lavinia nodded. "I have two younger siblings. Luckily, they're very precocious, and they're studying at an academy right now. I send them money as I'm able, but they're both self-sufficient."

"Lavinia, you're amazing."

"Me?"

"Yes! That's so much to take on."

Lavinia shrugged. "At the time it just seemed obvious. It's what I had to do to get by, so it's what I did. Same with you leaving home."

"Mine doesn't sound nearly as brave as yours," Rickie blushed.

"Keep some of that credit to yourself, Rickie," Lavinia insisted, playfully punching her shoulder. "I can't handle it all."

Rickie giggled and dug for a dandelion stem she'd picked out of the garden, playfully flinging it at Lavinia, who gave a surprised shriek.

"This is violence!" She laughed, digging for a projectile to send back.

By the time they were finished with the task and walked back to the house, Juliet wondered how they could possibly have gotten so dirty.

Knowing it was a day light on chores, Rickie took a while to coax herself out of the bed, sunning herself in the glow from her bedroom window. Eventually she rose, dressed casually, and made her way downstairs to the kitchen.

Prosper was seated at the table, a book splayed open in her right hand, her left caressing the handle of a coffee mug. Her hair was out of its usual braid, instead it cascaded down her back and fell over one half of her face. She eyed Rickie like a bored cat as she entered.

"Good morning," Rickie offered, giving her a wide berth as she began fixing her own breakfast. Prosper returned a curt nod.

Sitting down across the table with fresh toast, peach jam, and a cup of black, Rickie decided to press her luck.

“Just you and I today?”

Prosper looked over her shoulder, then peered into the distance behind Rickie.

“Yes, it certainly seems that way. I hadn’t noticed,” she answered, feigning surprise.

Rickie frowned. “Well...how are you?”

Prosper sighed and closed her book. Brushing her hair out of her face, she looked at Rickie directly. “You’d like to talk, is that it? What about?”

Rickie was taken aback and didn’t answer.

“I hear the weather is a popular topic,” Prosper teased, in a tone one might use to speak to a toddler.

“Are you always this hostile?” Rickie asked, frustrated.

“Listen,” Prosper began, “we live in the same home. You are, somehow, part of my coven. I do not have to like spending time with you.”

“Now that you mention it, yes, it is quite unpleasant being together,” Rickie fired back.

“That’s the first intelligent thing I’ve heard you say,” Prosper cooed. She stood, scooped her book off the table, and sauntered her way out of the room.

“Do all new witches walk through walls, or was that just me?” Rickie asked. The workshop was stuffy, and hot, and the open windows did little to let out the stifling heat. Oliver was carefully considering the current batch of tonics, and she was absently arranging the bottles for them to be packaged in.

“Just you, that I’ve seen,” Oliver answered monotonously. “Not every witch has that kind of connection to the Skein. It does make you easier to spot, though.”

“Did you have something like that?”

Oliver's lips curled into a wry smile. "I might have accidentally lifted the organic chemistry aisle of my university's library a few feet in the air."

"Lifted?"

He nodded. "I was...upset, as you might imagine. Spontaneous, unwanted outbursts of magic usually come from emotional dysregulation. Like the doors that you open from thin air."

Rickie struggled to picture what the even-keeled Oliver would even look like upset.

"Think you could do that with these tonics? Save me some time getting them into the crates," Rickie quipped. Oliver dignified her joke with a disapproving stare.

"Okay, so can anyone do magic? If they know about the Skein?" She changed the subject.

"Almost anyone can learn, if they want to. Cultures all over the world have different understanding of magic, and I've met witches of all ages, ethnicities, backgrounds. There are different regional schools of magic, even...the Skein takes all kinds."

"That's amazing, really."

"It certainly is," he responded, wiping at his brow. "What would be even *more* amazing is some help bottling this, so we can get out of this oven of a workshop."

"Yes sir!" Rickie laughed.

Rickie waited in her bedroom as the last rays of sunlight faded from the evening sky. The moon had been visible even in the late afternoon, but stargazing was pointless until the night finally came around. She rested her head on a rolled-up quilt, lounging in bed and trying not to be so comfortable as to fall asleep.

Eventually satisfied that it was sufficiently dark, she rushed from her bedroom down the hall to Alder's room. She managed two raps on the wood before Alder flung it open, pillows under each of faer arms. Fae flashed a gleeful smile and the two traipsed down the spiral stairs and out the back door.

“Don’t let me fall asleep out here, okay? Don’t need to catch any more hell for that,” Rickie asked.

“I’ve got you,” Alder assured, unrolling the quilt near the crest of a hill some fifty feet from the house. “I took a nap earlier, so I’ll probably be up late.”

The two laid down on the fabric and situated themselves. Rickie laid stick-straight with one arm folded over her stomach, while Alder sprawled out to occupy as much room as possible. The stars were already brilliant, but after a few minutes of laying out, yet more came into view. Rickie could see long smatterings of far-away bodies like a painter had wiped their brush across the canvas of the sky.

“How are you with constellations?” Alder asked.

“I’ve heard the word.”

Alder gave a sonorous *oh*, intrigued. “Do you want to learn?”

Rickie shrugged. “I’m already here. Might as well.”

“Okay, well the first thing to know is that all the stars got named after gods and fables a couple thousand years ago, by some crotchety old geezers. So, if you don’t like what they saw in the night sky, that’s okay, you can call them whatever you want.”

Rickie giggled. “Throw out the book? Very educational, Alder.”

“I’m very talented,” Alder grinned. “So that one, that’s supposed to be a hunter, and there’s their bow.”

“I can kind of see it,” Rickie replied, following where Alder’s finger was pointing. “I reject that idea.”

“Oh, yeah? What do you see?”

“That’s clearly Marta. There’s aer needle, then the three stars right there, that’s aer measuring tape aer always draping over aemselves.”

Alder let out a belly laugh. “I can definitely see it.”

They laid out on the grass, redefining the stars until the early hours of the morning.

“Yes, we’re here for Mr. Parker,” Rickie explained, “we’re the insurance appraisers.”

The factory foreman looked at the girls, his bushy mustache hiding the lower half of his confused expression.

“Oh, yes. Appraisers. I’ll get him right away.”

Lavinia and Rickie exchanged knowing glances. Lavinia giggled. Oliver had presented them with this absurd project that morning, a special request from another member of the magical community. Casting a protection spell over a whole factory, at the request of a factory worker’s mother. Rickie thought it was an adorable idea.

The small cannery on Wilhelmina’s west end was bustling with activity; white-aproned workers in muck boots scuttled about the fat-slick floor, many of them Rickie’s age or younger. The equipment, which lined the walls and formed a square block in the center of the cement floor, made unbearable screeching, scraping noises, but Lavinia’s muffling spell protected Rickie’s ears diligently. The smell, like much of west Wilhelmina’s industry, was serving as the ultimate advertisement against the use of its products. Sunlight just barely made it through the open vents in the ceiling, and light came primarily from overhead fluorescents.

From a small office above the factory floor came a round little man, bald but for the last few long strands of white hair clinging to the crown of his sweaty head. He dabbed himself with a folded handkerchief on his walk down the metal stairs.

“Ladies,” he began, curious, “you’re from the agency?”

Rickie repeated what Oliver had helped her rehearse. “Yes Mr. Parker, it’s almost time to renew. We’re here for the inspection.” She produced a business card from the breast of her coat- entirely for show- and handed it over. Mr. Parker took it unscrupulously.

“Bully, very good!” he assured, tucking the card into a pocket.

“We’ll have a look around, if that is alright?”

“By all means, may I accompany you?”

Rickie forced her most demure smile. “Of course, Sir, but leave us room to work.”

Lavinia pulled her tape measure from the messenger bag, and the two began their walk shoulder-to-shoulder with Mr. Parker following behind.

“You’re doing great. Chat him up a bit more, I’ll start setting the seals,” Lavinia explained. Rickie nodded nervously. They walked the floor until they found a supporting pillar and Lavinia went to work inconspicuously with a piece of chalk, taking care to put the mark where it was not likely to be rubbed off anytime soon. The chalk was mixed with ground herbs and protective minerals, letting the girls put all the components into the spell at once. The center of the seal was the most important and often the most delicate.

“How is business, Mr. Parker?” Rickie began. Oliver assured her this was the single best piece of small talk for this situation.

“Oh lord, business!” came the shrill response. Rickie had him hooked. “Well sales are up, always good. Impossible to find good help these days, though.”

“Truly!” Rickie responded, feigning interest.

“I understand, really, the workforce is changing,” the man explained as he tutted behind the two witches, “but our compensation package is one of the best in the industry.”

“Is that so, Mr. Parker?” Rickie inquired, “what makes it so good?”

“The balance of it all,” he answered excitedly, “eleven-hour workdays? You won’t get that just anywhere, especially for this work. That’s more than half for a man to spend with his family. I’m sure a woman like you can appreciate having your man about the house a bit more.”

Rickie stifled her natural disgust at the audacity of his assumptions. Lavinia had finished her first seal and was measuring the paces to the next placement. Nearby two men were rolling a barrel of something marked “Hazardous.”

“The pay, as well! We don’t even pay them in company scrip, it’s all real dollars. Why, you could spend that on anything you want.”

“Most flexible,” Rickie offered.

“Don’t I know it! They ought to think of the company occasionally. I think of my business a lot like a family, really.”

Rickie had no deflection for this. She extended a measuring tape for Lavinia, who pretended to mark off a certain distance as she drew a rune on the east wall. Rickie took note of how she was doing it, hoping next time she’d be working the actual magic and Lavinia would be the performing artist.

“Say, Mr. Parker,” she began, as Lavinia plotted their course to the next fulcrum rune, “what if I wanted to work here?”

“Well! I think there’s a home for everyone on the floor. Doesn’t take that much muscle to work the press or do some sorting.”

Rickie watched as a child about the age of fourteen wobbled by them with a fully laden toolbox in one arm.

“Oh, but I meant in management, Mr. Parker,” she pressed.

The industrialist seemed taken aback. “We haven’t actually had a lady foreman here.”

“You have women working the floor, though, I’ve seen them.”

“Yes of course, but they leave,” Mr. Parker countered, “to start a family and things of that nature.” Lavinia placed the third rune behind a rolling tool chest and pointed towards where she envisioned the fourth. Rickie followed.

“Do the men not leave for their families? I mean, they’re parents too,” Rickie asked. She was beginning to enjoy making Mr. Parker sweat.

“We don’t offer it. Truly I don’t think there’s a market for it, Miss, most men would rather be at work and earning their bread,” he said confidently.

“I see. Well, that won’t be a problem with me, I don’t want kids.”

Mr. Parker seemed put off by this. “I suppose on a case-by-case basis...there could be a female foreman. If the men respected her and she did the work, of course.”

Rickie nodded, but still didn’t believe him for an instant. Rickie made a show of taking notes on her clipboard when Lavinia took the lead. She winked at Rickie and motioned for the last rune. It was Rickie’s turn! Nervously, she drew the rune for *ferta* and set it with a touch and a short incantation, whispered. Even with the distractions of the factory floor, she could feel the Skein beneath her feet lending her power. She hurried back to Lavinia with a beaming smile.

“Things seem in good order, Mr. Parker, I believe we can renew at the same rate as last year, if that is agreeable to you,” Lavinia declared.

“Most agreeable!”

“Splendid,” she replied, glancing at Rickie with a knowing smile. Rickie handed over the clipboard with the fictional, pre-filled contract, which the boss glanced over before signing with a slender fountain pen.

“Pleasure doing business good Sir,” Lavinia continued, shaking his hand, “do take care and write if you’ve any questions.”

“We still need to salt the perimeter,” Lavinia explained once they were clear of the factory door. She gave Rickie a tender squeeze on the shoulder. “You were fantastic.”

Rickie beamed. “I was?”

“Absolutely! Don’t take a job here, okay? I like working with you.”

The air was a bit clearer outside, and Rickie felt more comfortable as they spread the sea salt away from any onlookers. They finished two sides of the rectangular factory before turning to see a group of men. Two workers, Rickie could tell from their wading boots, and a nicely dressed man with a handful of papers. The two witches tried to hurry past.

“Pardon me, ladies!” came a familiar voice. Against her better judgment, Rickie glanced back to see the man calling for her. She cursed under her breath as Elijah approached her, papers in hand. The suit Rickie associated him with was stripped back for a dress shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows, and muted tan suspenders.

“I beg your pardon,” he began, “do you work here at this factory? Or perhaps your husbands or brothers?”

Rickie wheeled to face him, her stomach falling a little as his expression showed he recognized her.

“Oh,” he said, collecting himself. His tone was immediately less warm, less trusting. “I recognize you. Carey?”

“Rickie. Elijah?”

“I’m terribly sorry, you’d think I’d be better with names in my line of work,” Elijah apologized, bowing slightly. Rickie was already tired of him.

“You know one another?” Lavinia asked.

“He came to the cart one day, while I was helping Oliver.”

“Quite right,” Elijah replied. “The magic potions, I recall. I wouldn’t expect to find you here! Selling in the factory district today, Miss Rickie?”

“Out for a stroll, Mr. Elijah,” Rickie replied, “or is there something wrong with taking the air?”

“Wouldn’t be my first choice for taking the air,” Elijah noted, extending a pamphlet to her. “I’ve heard the sludge this place produces is toxic; poisons the lungs and stings the eyes. In any case, if you know anyone in this factory, would you pass this along? Perhaps with your snake oil?”

Rickie took it, noting it was a piece about hazardous working conditions. Rickie passed it to Lavinia.

“This for the workers here?” Lavinia asked.

“I like to spread the word. Not everyone reads the papers, so it’s important to distribute on the grounds.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Rickie asked.

“If you’re caught, yes,” Elijah responded, smiling. “Probably no more dangerous than actually working there for that foul Mr. Parker.”

Rickie bit her tongue for a moment, experiencing the cognitive displeasure of realizing someone she didn’t like had a very good point. “Yes, I will pass this on.”

“I’m most grateful, Miss.”

“Good day to you, Mr. Friason,” she dismissed him. He tipped his cap in a grand show and turned to leave. The witches finished their protective circle very carefully, looking over their shoulders.

“Have you been thinking about a name?” Lavinia asked. She paced along the side of a shallow stream, worn-smooth rocks crunching beneath her boots. They were in an underused field, allowed to molder and grow weeds and whatever other seeds blew onto it. The sun was high overhead, and the heat bordered on misery. Days like this reminded Rickie of being outside as a small child and hiding in the hayloft of her family’s barn.

“I get to pick?” Rickie asked. She was pawing at the tall grass that bordered the creek, a floppy straw hat shielding her eyes as she watched Lavinia. Her fingers twisted dandelions together into a makeshift crown, their pulp rubbing off on her skin.

“Everyone gets to pick. The initiation is a big to-do, but you will get to introduce yourself to the Skein, in a way,” Lavinia said. “Everyone picks their name during that.”

“How did you pick ‘Lavinia?’”

She smiled. “It’s silly. I didn’t know anyone with the name, so in my head it was kind of unoccupied- and I thought it was pretty. That’s all it took.”

“It is very pretty,” Rickie affirmed. Lavinia looked pleased.

Rickie spun the thought in her head. Lavinia’s process was sound- she certainly wanted something pretty, and it would be nice to have something that didn’t carry memories of someone else attached.

“Can I get your opinion on some?”

Lavinia laughed. “It’s your name! You shouldn’t care what I think about it.”

Rickie knew she very much cared about what Lavinia thought of it. “What if I pick a bad one?”

“Then you will rub off on it until it becomes a good name,” she declared.

Rickie’s cheeks flushed a shade of red quite near Lavinia’s hair. She looked down into her lap and cinched the last two flowers together. She stood delicately and held the crown up, and Lavinia feigned a bow to accept it. They laughed as Lavinia stood back up, trying to keep it balanced on her head.

“I haven’t made one of those in a really long time,” Rickie commented. “It’s kind of what we did in the summers. Next-to-nothing, but in the sun.”

“I think next-to-nothing is quite entertaining, as long as I’m doing it with you,” Lavinia smiled.

Five

Rickie sat upright in bed gripping a hand mirror as though she could choke answers out of its carved handle. She wore her best black dress, laced up, and felt every bit a witch. For weeks, there had been no doubt in her mind that she belonged, with those she belonged with, and thoroughly enjoying the simple act of existing for the first time she could remember. Yet why did acknowledging this bring some new anxiety out of her?

She felt like she was on some precipice for which there was no way back. Everything to this point had been wonderful but non-committal. Tonight, she would “meet” with the Skein, and cross what felt like an impermeable barrier into otherness. She felt the Rickie she knew would forever change, if she remained at all.

Rickie fought against the fearful ideas that crept up. What would be so bad about this being permanent? This was where she was happy. She had lived almost twenty years another way and knew she didn’t like that. Was there anything in this new life that could be scarier than going back to the old one? She would be different, true, but there was no longer any denying that. It did not require her acknowledgement to be true, she was very different, and whether her head were in the sand or in the clouds that wouldn’t change.

She sighed. She swore. She looked in the mirror again. None of the names she tried felt right. She stared down at her reflection and started again.

“Chloe,” she tried. Too friendly.

“Morgan,” she said, raising her pitch. She was sure there was already a witch by this name.

“Elizabeth.” This had a ring, but she didn’t like any of the nicknames that could come from it.

“Oh, fuck it. I’m saying the first thing that pops up,” she grumbled. “It can’t be so bad. I mean what kind of name is ‘Prosper’ anyhow?”

She popped to her feet, gave her skirts one last brushing out, and sighed. She was as ready as she would ever be. On cue, Alder wrapped at her door.

“Ready?” fae asked, poking faer head a smidge inside.

“Alder, how did you get your name?”

“I was born with this one.”

“Really?”

“Really; my father was an arborist. My whole family is named after trees.”

“Huh,” Rickie considered. “I am ready.” Alder looked more excited than her. Faer smile was huge, and faer big brown eyes looked at her through glasses in desperate need of cleaning.

“Don’t be nervous, you’ve got this. You’ve already done the hard part.”

“We’re not going to be dancing naked below a full moon? No drinking goat’s blood?”

“I wish,” Alder joked. “It’s pretty tame physically.”

“Just physically?”

Fae shrugged. “I mean, you’ll be better connected to the source of all magic than ever before. That’s going to be intense for anyone’s soul.”

Rickie nodded her understanding. The two walked out of the cottage and over the north hill to the appointed place. The moon was full overhead, and fireflies flitted about in the warm, still air. A simple pentacle had been prepared with a moonstone at each point, and lines of quartz, malachite, and amethyst bridging between them. The other witches stood at each point. Alder gave Rickie an encouraging pat on the back and took faer position in the southwest corner.

Swallowing hard, Rickie walked to the middle. She faced Juliet, who stood at the due northern point. She abandoned her post to walk over to the frightened initiate.

“How are you feeling?” Her words were soft and matronly to Rickie and made her feel a bit better already.

Rickie shrugged. “I’m a little scared.”

“I was too. It will be over before you know it, and I promise it doesn’t hurt,” she replied. “We also don’t have to. There will be more full moons.”

“No,” Rickie insisted. “I can do this.”

Juliet smiled, gave Rickie’s arm a gentle squeeze, and walked back to her point. Rickie looked around. Lavinia was beaming at her, and Rickie smiled back. Prosper’s face gave no indication of how she was feeling. Alder was encouraging, and Oliver as stoic as ever. He was the one to break the silence.

“We should begin. Rickie, have a seat at the center of the seal.”

She did as instructed.

“Everyone remembers the incantation?” he asked.

Nods from the other witches.

“Splendid. Rickie, clear your mind as best you can. Feel the Skein around you, and you’ll be there shortly.”

Rickie did so. The Skein always had a feeling to it- it was like a second, steady heartbeat that kept time to the world. At first it had felt like it was distant to her, but as she had honed her magic, she could feel it more closely- as though she were wading through it when she called upon it. Being in the center of this circle was yet unlike that feeling, now it felt as though the Skein was rising above her head, filling her nostrils, her ears, her mouth. It poured into her until she felt herself sputtering and opening her eyes to fight back above the surface.

Her eyes opened to a different world. Her coven mates were gone, the pentacle was no more, the hills were different. Above her, the sky was a perfect, unadulterated palette of stars, more than Rickie had ever seen. They were grouped so densely in some places that they looked like streaks of silver paint. More prominent than the stars were the moons that seemed to stretch in a straight line across the

night- or what Rickie presumed to be night- sky. They were in various stages of waxing and waning, and each was a different color- the familiar silvery-white, a lustrous red orange, a muted blue, and others.

Around her were trees that looked like they had been blown into glass. Their bark and leaves were shimmering. Their leaves were a pale shade of pink, their bark deep green. Entranced, Rickie reached for a branch and pulled down a leaf. Sure enough, it felt firm but delicate in her hand, like an icicle. Bewildered, she shook it and watched as the leaf seemed to turn to liquid within its casing, then settle back to its usual form, reforming exactly as it was, right down to its veins and petiole. The grass brushing against her feet was the color of goldenrod. The world was completely still and silent, but for her.

She then felt something brush against her left hand. A moth, with long, pale white wings striped with tan had decided to rest there, clinging to the back of her hand. Rickie raised it to get a better look.

“Hey little fella,” Rickie cooed, “are you here to introduce me?”

The moth beat its wings twice, and from the trees around Rickie emerged a swarm of moths, each the same ghostly pale color of the first. Their swirling mass coalesced before her into the shape of a human, but at no point were the moths still, their bodies continually moving and making this form look as though it were vibrating. The first moth left Rickie’s hand and fluttered toward the head of the moth-person, and took its position in the middle of the face- the brown markings on its wings making it look as though the figure had eyes.

Rickie was speechless, so the moth spoke first.

“Are you still afraid?” it asked. Its voice wasn’t singular but rather a harmony, many voices speaking at once. Rickie couldn’t assign it an age or a gender.

“Surprised, maybe, but no. I’m not afraid of you.”

It seemed approving of this, somehow.

“Where am I?”

“You are exactly where you are meant to be.”

“Well, what are you? Are you the Skein?”

“I speak for it, but I am not all of it. It is too vast to be just *one* thing. So are you, in fact.”

Rickie realized her direct questions weren’t going to get her far. She nodded.

“What should we call you?” the moth asked her. It seemed to extend a hand in her direction.

She gulped and froze for a moment. She hadn’t narrowed down her list of finalists and blurted the first name to make it to the tip of her tongue. “Theodora.”

“Theodora is a wonderful name for a witch,” the moth approved. “I shall know you by that name. You have a deep lineage of bravery. Your forebears, your siblings in magic, survived more than you could imagine. You have inherited this.”

“How do you know all that?”

“Witches are a constant. They have always been, and always will be. Through that time, they have always been brave - you are exceptionally so.”

With this, the figure dissipated, the moths broke apart and flew with heavy, buzzing strokes around the newly named Theodora, so close they were almost touching her. She held in a shriek and closed her eyes.

The buzzing stopped. She opened her eyes and found herself on her back, looking up at her usual sky. The moon was full, but there was only one of them. The stars were beautiful, but not quite so numerous, and were soon blocked out by the faces of three witches.

“You’re back! How was it?” Lavinia asked. She was to Theodora’s left, Alder to her right, and Prosper stood above her head.

“Haven’t you been?” she asked in return.

“No one sees the same thing,” Prosper cajoled, expecting her to know that already.

“Oh,” she frowned. “There were trees made of glass. Lots of moths.”

“That sounds so cool!” Alder exclaimed, giddily adding “mine had a lot of orange cats!” to no one in particular.

“What name did you pick?” Lavinia asked. The moonlight caught her face and made her look almost angelic to Theodora.

“Theodora,” she said tentatively.

“That’s so pretty,” Lavinia gushed, “Theodora.” It sounded better to her coming from Lavinia’s lips.

“We need a nickname for that,” Alder decided.

“Dora?” Prosper offered.

Theodora shook her head disapprovingly.

“Thea?” Alder suggested. “Say it like you really liked the ‘a’ at the end of ‘tea’”

“I kind of like that,” she answered, sitting up. “Thea is good.”

Juliet and Oliver were next to congratulate her. Juliet gave her a warm, tight hug, and once she got to her feet, Oliver patted her on the back and offered an approving nod. In their own particular ways, they made Thea feel like mother & father were proud of her.

The other witches cleaned up their implements as Thea walked back home, feeling now how profoundly tired she was. She still felt the Skein inside her chest. Lavinia brushed her shoulder.

“You’ll sleep hard tonight. It’s exhausting.”

“Afterwards, when you’re feeling better, we have to celebrate,” Alder declared, following close behind with faer hands full of stones.

“I don’t know if I can take another revel like your naming day,” Lavinia bemoaned.

“I didn’t ask you to keep up with me!”

“You specifically asked us to keep up with you,” Prosper added.

“Oh. Well, maybe don’t do that this time.”

Thea slept soundly through the night and well into the morning, dreamless and peaceful. The morning sun which usually brought her out of bed was no match for her exhaustion, and she finally stirred when her quilt became too warm, and she could feel sweat beading up along her hairline. She rose and stretched out languidly, like a cat.

Doing an inventory, she found she did in fact feel different. The Skein, usually available but external, now felt like it was within her sternum. Its familiar pulse was soft, steady, and metronomic. Feeling it, she smiled broadly and clutched at her chest. She dressed and made her way downstairs, taking the stairs two at a time.

Juliet and Lavinia were in the kitchen sharing a late-morning tea. Juliet flashed a proud smile as Thea walked in.

“How was your rest?” Juliet asked. Thea found a seat.

“I slept like a dead rock. It was delightful.”

“It takes a lot out of new witches,” Juliet explained.

“Speaking of, there’s some talk of going out this evening.”

“Out?” Thea asked, looking between the two other girls.

Lavinia put down her cup.

“We all want to take you to one of the safe spaces in Wilhelmina. It’s become a ritual, but I want to make sure you actually want to, rather than force you into it.”

“I thought we already did the ritual.”

“This is the post-ritual ritual,” Lavinia volleyed, “you’ll still be waking up late the next day, only you’ll have a pounding headache and vomit on your dress.”

Thea smiled. “When you put it like that, it sounds like great fun. I’ll wear my best dress.”

Lavinia feigned a frown. “Second best. Trust me. Maybe take it easy today, and we can get going around sundown?”

Thea nodded excitedly.

“Do you want to come, Juliet?” Lavinia asked.

“Gods, no,” she responded, shaking her head, golden curls swaying back and forth. “I’m too old to be staggering out of

Weaver's an hour before sunrise. Besides, I don't want you all to feel like I'm there to tut-tut you for having fun. Go and enjoy yourselves."

Lavinia looked at Thea and smiled. "Looks like it's you and I, Alder, and Prosper."

"Should we ask Oliver?"

Juliet stifled a chuckle, which was all the response that suggestion warranted.

"Okay, now just flick your wrist up, and you've got it," Alder encouraged. Thea was contorted into a knot, one hand holding her eye open and the other holding the sharpened pencil against her waterline. She flicked up and out, and a satisfying streak of black graphite was left running across her face, towards her temple.

"Is it even?" she asked, admiring herself in the mirror.

Alder took a moment to appraise both eyes before answering "even enough!"

Thea got out of the chair to let Alder take a turn at the vanity. Faer room was a complete mess, but the larger mirror made it much easier to do one's makeup, which Thea had only recently felt remotely comfortable with. She sat down on the edge of Alder's unmade bed and kicked her feet.

"Could I ask you something, and you promise not to share?"

Alder's head turned fast enough to send faer side braids airborne. "I'm listening."

"I'm serious. A grave secret."

"I'll not tell a soul, I swear on all I hold dear," fae proclaimed dramatically.

Thea smiled. "Okay, so...Lavinia-"

"-you fancy her, right?"

Thea froze, causing Alder to chuckle.

"Just seeing her makes you smile, Thea, it's not that hard to figure out," Alder elaborated.

"Well, I guess...do you think she likes me?"

Alder paused to put a new tip on the pencil with a few flicks of faer pocket knife. “See, Thea,” fae explained, examining faer work, “if everyone makes me swear on all I hold dear to keep safe their grave secrets, then I can’t go spilling the grave secrets to other people in the coven.”

“So...she does like me?” Thea inferred, hopeful.

“I didn’t say that!” Alder insisted. “What I will say is, you should probably just ask. The answer is always “no” if you don’t ask. However, if the answer is “no”, you’ve got to be okay with that.”

Thea paused for a moment. That was the source of her dilemma. She didn’t know if she was okay with that possibility. It might be better to never find out the answer, to learn to be content with a perpetual distance between them. Then again, she thought, if she had followed that advice, she’d never have become a witch in the first place.

“I’m catching your drift,” she answered, finally.

Alder smiled into the mirror. “Alright, how do I look?”

Thea hopped off the bed, and the two witches inspected themselves in the mirror.

“You look...devilish,” Thea praised, taking in Alder’s somber red eyelids and pale cheeks.

“Ooooh, then you look...ravishing,” Alder countered. Thea struck a gaudy, exaggerated pose, letting her long eyelashes flutter under the silvery glitter she’d painted onto her eyes. They both laughed.

“Let’s get going, then.”

Weaver’s, like many locations central to magical society, was not an easy place to find. Wilhelmina had been through quite the phase with alcohol. First an integral part of the culture of its indigenous peoples - and later its colonial oppressors - it became an outlawed contraband during a period of religious prohibitionism that predated Thea. That period was brief, and even then, it did not mean it couldn’t be acquired, and the existence of a private hole-in-the-wall

club wasn't a foreign concept to the socialites and barflies of Wilhelmina society. *Weaver's* operated with an additional layer of secrecy, in that you had to be a witch, or witch adjacent, to enter.

The coven had used the portal to transfer to the workshop, then caught a carriage west to a residential area, stopping a few streets from their actual destination. Lavinia and Thea sat next to each other on the open-air bench, the sun having just now set and the streetlamps on and buzzing. Lavinia had opted for pants and a powder blue, lace front blouse that offset her curly orange hair.

"Do you need a deafening spell for your ears?" Lavinia asked, cognizant of Thea's sensitivity.

She shook her head. "No, I can do it myself, if I need to."

Lavinia smiled affirmatively.

They dismounted and made the rest of the way on foot. After a few turns into a narrow alleyway between apartment blocks, there was a rusted metal sliding door that looked to lead into one of the buildings, likely a service entrance. Nearby, Thea noticed a brick that had halfway fallen away, leaving a gap in the wall. Alder placed a bundle of herbs into the alcove, while Prosper sketched a few runes into the brickwork. When Alder pulled the door aside, it opened into a coat room. The witches walked in.

The room was well lit, rectangular, and overwhelmingly red. A blush-red carpet, red wallpaper with yellow filigree climbing up. Along the walls were rolling coat racks with a variety of blazers, furs, scarves, and working jackets. At the far end, perhaps fifteen feet away, a person sat in a semi-circular booth, by the only other door. The doorperson had their hair concealed under a bandana and was wearing more rings than they had fingers. Their complexion was warm and friendly.

"Welcome to Weaver's," called their high, calm voice, smiling faintly at the group. "Oh, hey Alder."

Alder approached, grinning, and reached over the counter to give them a hug. The greeter planted a kiss on Alder's left cheek.

“You all are good to go in. You know the rules,” the person called to the girls. Tapping Alder on the shoulder, they added “I’ll come find you when I’m off.”

Inside was a world decorated to such excess Thea had trouble focusing. The walls were covered in animal skulls, cameos of folks she didn’t recognize, hanging dried flowers, mirrors, and other bric-a-brac. The bar was situated on the right wall, backlit. Light reflected off all manner of labeled bottles and scattered onto the enameled surface of its wormy chestnut counter. Two bartenders worked in close proximity. Thea watched as one set a metal shaker cup down with a spoon, which began stirring itself. Beyond the gaily dressed patrons chatting away at the bar, the other walls seemed lined with private booths. Most had their sliding doors closed, and after a moment Thea registered that they looked like the confessional booths one might find in cathedrals. She smiled at the blasphemy. The witches slid into the first unoccupied one they could find.

The booth was rectangular, with high dividing walls between the others next to it. The bench seats were also crimson, the square table in the center a deep brown. The confessional door slit shut with a click. Thea slid in next to Lavinia and Alder.

“Missed this place,” Alder commented, straightening the collar on faer pressed shirt which had been caught by faer suspenders.

“Seems the place missed you as well,” Prosper teased.

“Oh, she’s just a friend,” Alder played it off.

The confessional door slid open, startling Thea. Standing in the doorway was a sharp looking woman with a tray of drinks. Her eyes, behind big round-rimmed glasses, surveyed them. Her hand, like a bird’s beak, neatly deposited each drink in front of the intended recipient.

“Alder, here is your usual,” she spoke matter-of-factly, laying a short glass with a lot of brown liquid in it before Alder.

“Prosper, yours,” she added, handing a perfectly clear beverage in a high-stemmed glass to Prosper. Her red lips curled into a smile in response.

“And for our less-than-regular patrons- no offense,” she added, placing two brightly pink beverages before Lavinia and Thea.

“This will taste like a peach- with the fuzz. Oh, and Thea,” she added, “congratulations!” With a smile, she was gone, and the door clicked closed once more.

Thea glanced around, picking up her drink gingerly. “Do they just know?”

“Usually,” Alder responded, quaffing faer drink with gusto. Realizing faer mistake, fae held the nearly empty glass up in toast. “To Thea finding her name?”

Thea smiled and raised hers. Lavinia followed, squeezing Thea’s thigh with her free hand. Prosper added hers. The glasses came together with a clumsy, disordered *clink*, and the girls took a sip. The waitress hadn’t lied- it really did taste like a peach.

Alder excused faerself for a refill and Lavinia followed to find the restroom. When the door shut, it was just Thea and Prosper. Thea studied the other girl. Her legs were crossed in the seat, and her ruffled, black skirt took up most of the aisle on her side. She sipped her drink and seemed to refuse any acknowledgement of Thea. Taking a long swig of her drink and smacking her lips, Thea decided to face the issue.

“You’ve never liked me, and I can’t figure out why.”

Prosper smiled, swirled her drink in its glass once more, then sat it down.

“Of course you can’t figure it out, you’re rather dense.”

“Fuck you, Prosper.”

Prosper feigned a smile, then rose from her seat. She took an emphatic stride towards Thea, her skirt fluttering over the floor. She stopped just in front of the neonate witch, who sat up straight to make eye contact, scowling. Prosper put one knee on the bench to

Thea's side, blocking her route to the door, then lowered herself down into her lap. Thea couldn't hide her surprise or her discomfort.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just going to explain myself," Prosper said, patronizing. The scent of gin on her breath irritated Thea's nose.

"Can't you explain yourself over there?"

"I could, but I'm worried you're too stupid to retain it, so let's make it memorable," she sneered. No matter where Thea looked, Prosper followed her, trying to trap her in eye contact. Finally, Thea gave up on it. Her tormentor was silhouetted by the lamp overhead, and Thea could barely see her expression.

"You see, Thea," Prosper explained, "you're a liability. This whole thing? This magical world you got an invitation to? This is very fragile, and already worryingly garish as it is. It relies on secrecy. Everyone that knows about it, and can't control themselves, is another opportunity for it all to come tumbling down. We're never more than one ignorant loudmouth from a witch hunt."

"You think I'd go and tell someone?"

"I think one day you'll slip up and get caught red-handed. You lack subtlety. You can't stealth, and one day you'll get clocked. You've treated this entire thing like the doe-eyed country bumpkin you are, maybe because it's the first time you've gone a day without smelling sheep shit and sleeping on a hay bale," Prosper goaded.

"Forgive me, I didn't realize being a witch took a certain pedigree. Aren't you only here because you got tired of the taste of daddy's silver spoon in your mouth? How is your privileged rebellion any different?" Thea fired back.

Prosper's nose wrinkled up into a scowl, and she put her thumb and index finger on Thea's chin, pulling her agonizingly close. She could see how derisive Prosper looked. "This is my life," she spat, "I don't trust you. What's more, I don't like you, maybe because you're just so determined to be liked. You're cloying. It lives under your skin that I don't like you, and it's pathetic."

Thea stared blankly back into Prosper's snide smirk. "You've got really nice teeth, Prosper. If you don't get off me, we can pick them off the floor together."

With theatrical extravagance, Prosper released her grip and rose off Thea's lap. She gave Thea a flip of her hair before returning to her seat and smoothing out her skirts.

Alder peeled open the door and slid in, Lavinia followed close behind with a fresh glass. "We're back!" she declared, sitting down next to Prosper.

Prosper and Thea hadn't taken eyes off one another, both determined to shoot daggers across the private room at one another.

"What did I miss?" Lavinia asked, picking up on the tension.

"Oh, just girl talk," Prosper smiled, playing off her displeasure convincingly. "I think I'll have another," she added, putting down her glass and leaving the booth.

Thea was shaking. She felt like her legs wouldn't carry her if she asked, but she knew being inside for another moment would be intolerable. She forced herself up, and put one rigid step in front of the other until she was through the booth door, through the front door into the coat room, and finally out into the night air. She didn't breathe until she was outside.

Finding a spot along the brick walls of the alley, she sank down to the stones and curled her legs up to her chest. She looked down at her boots and sobbed, tears obscuring her vision and meandering down her face. She didn't understand how someone could dislike her so much, and for so little.

"Thea!" Lavinia called. She looked up. Her friend was maybe ten feet away, watching with concern. Thea sniffled.

Lavinia got down on one knee next to her. "Are you alright?"

"Prosper just said some...unkind things," Thea explained, trying to quit crying.

Lavinia looked over her shoulder at Weaver's, then back to Thea. "I'm sorry dear. I wish she wasn't such a bitch, and I wish the

community was big enough to get away from her type for a little while.”

Lavinia pushed Thea’s hair out of her face and behind her ear. “Your hair looks so pretty now that you’ve grown it out a little.”

Thea looked into Lavinia’s bright, hazel eyes and smiled. Her touch was comforting. Thea put her hand up and took Lavinia’s, pressing it to her cheek.

“You can say no to this, but...,” Thea began, “I’ve wanted to kiss you for a really long time.”

Lavinia’s eyes grew wide, and she beamed at Thea. Unable to find the words, she just nodded her head. Thea leaned in and savored the moment. Lavinia’s lips were soft, inviting, and the two let the kiss linger for a long time before they pulled away.

“You knew, didn’t you?” Thea asked. Her tears, still rolling down her cheeks, were now diverted by the widest of smiles.

“I didn’t know, but I did hope,” Lavinia answered. She twinned her fingers in with Thea’s and squeezed tightly.

“Can we go home?” Thea asked.

“Of course, darling,” Lavinia answered. It was a few minutes before a carriage could be found. Once they found one, Thea laid her head on Lavinia’s shoulder and let her stroke her hair until she dozed off.

Six

“You all seem off,” Juliet mused, “long night?”

The witches were assembled around the kitchen table. Alder sat with a bundle of ice cubes against his head, eyes closed to the morning sunlight streaming in from the window above the sink. Prosper’s index finger repeatedly tapped against her mug. Lavinia and Thea sat close together on the other end of the bench from Prosper.

Saving the others from needing to answer, Alder gave a thumbs up and a smile. Juliet laughed.

“We have a most unusual request today, from one of our magical siblings further afield. The farming community nearest them is being plagued by some manner of creature. Livestock being carried off, fences broken, hen houses demolished.”

“Is this really a job for us?” Prosper interjected.

“I believe it can be, if you applied yourself,” Juliet responded. “Our warding spells can keep out all manner of predators when placed thoughtfully. You might also see about purifying the grounds from any negative energies. There is likely a lot of fear concentrated there.”

“I want to go,” Thea insisted, eager for her first special assignment as a real witch.

“She’ll get herself eaten by wolves, don’t be silly,” Prosper cajoled.

“I’m going with her,” Lavinia added, scowling at Prosper.

“How about they all go, and maybe they come back as friends?” Oliver suggested. His eyes did not even leave the book he was studying.

“Splendid idea!” Juliet clapped her hands together with a smirk. “I’d like the three of you to gather your components, and

maybe some pillows, and take the train over. It's half a day by locomotive. Our friend Hortencia will meet you at the station."

Thea's heart sank. An assignment with Prosper, specifically? She'd hoped to avoid any more conflict, and now it felt inevitable. Lavinia squeezed her hand beneath the table, sensing her anxiety.

The nearest train station was almost half an hour's ride by carriage, which passed in silence. The witches each had a bag of personal belongings and a separate bag for spell components, most picked fresh from the coven's greenhouse. Dried ingredients *clinked* in glass bottles as the carriage swayed over the beaten, but far from even path. Lavinia had the map and Juliet's instructions.

Thea got her ticket from a mustachioed man in a circular cap who smelled like sweat and the last swig of coffee in a cold pot. The platform did little to soothe her senses. The train was loud, both its whistle and the wheels as it screeched to a halt before them. A continuous plume of black, acrid smoke trailed from the engine. The girls got aboard a sparse train car and took their seats as the metal slug lurched back to life.

The countryside rolled past at alarming speed for Thea, but she was fixated on it, staring through the dusty window at the fences, pastures, cattle, wheat, corn, and passerby until her stomach began to feel ill. She curled her knees up to her chest in her seat. She hadn't thought to cast the deafening spell Lavinia taught her, which was a mistake, as the train's noise and intermittent whistles were overwhelming.

"Sheffield," Prosper mused, looking over the directions from Juliet, her other hand propping open a book, "never heard of it."

Thea perked up. "That can't be right."

Prosper tersely extended the note to Thea, who took it. Her eyes hurried across the page, but her mind couldn't seem to accept the information. Something caught in her throat and prevented her from screaming. She didn't feel like she could talk at all. She stood, shakily, and walked to the end of the train car to find she couldn't open the door onto the platform, and in any case, it would probably

be unsafe to do so. She tried again and again to make it move, without success. The air felt heavy, and her breathing was shallow.

Lavinia caught up with her. "Are you alright?"

Thea shook her head.

"I don't think we can leave the train right now," Lavinia explained, "but would you like to sit down together?"

Thea nodded, words eluding her. Lavinia grabbed her shoulders and walked her back to her seat. Thea pressed herself against the side of the train, trying to make herself as small as possible. Prosper eyed her curiously, and after a moment removed her coat and offered it to Lavinia.

Lavinia looked at her confused and Prosper gestured towards the cowering Thea. Lavinia nodded, then spread the jacket out like a blanket on top of Thea. Thea couldn't react but appreciated the weight of it on top of her. A few minutes passed before Thea could speak.

"I'm from Sheffield," she explained. "My family lives there. I left a little over a year ago, they didn't take all of it well."

"You don't have to go if it would be hurtful for you. Prosper and I could handle it."

Thea shook her head. "No. I want to be helpful. I just wasn't expecting to see them...hopefully I don't."

"Hopefully we don't," Lavinia agreed. She extended a hand to Thea, and Thea took it gratefully.

"If we do?" Prosper asked.

The other girls looked at her.

"I don't mean it to stir you up," Prosper explained, "but it would be nice to know what we can do to...help. If that happens. For everyone's sake."

Lavinia was poised with a rebuttal, but Thea spoke up first. "Sometimes, when I get surprised or upset by things, I can't speak. It's not that I don't want to, it's just that my body won't. Getting away is the best thing for me, even if I'm going alone. If I can't

physically leave..." she thought for a moment, "just picking up the conversation for me would be good."

"Of course," Lavinia affirmed, her fingers gently massaging Thea's scalp.

The landscape outside the windows turned from cultivated fields to uninhibited prairieland. Tall switchgrass, milkweed, bluestems and coneflowers were stirred by the wind from the passing locomotive and seemed to wave at the witches traveling by. It all told Thea they were getting close.

The train halted at Sheffield station around dinner time, though the summer sun was still high overhead. Thea was initially disoriented, unsure what part of town she'd arrived at. The train station was new, as were the electric lines, though certainly fewer in number here than in Wilhelmina. She got her bearings from nearby landmarks- a few hundred feet away was the general store, same as she remembered. Further down the line of the one-street town was the chapel she'd been dragged to for holidays and celebrations.

The station was sparse, but waiting patiently was a small, older woman in a sprawling blue bonnet and a knowing smile. Her skin was a weathered brown color, likely from years of sun exposure. Prosper was the first to figure her for a witch.

"Hortensia?"

The woman nodded, and with a warm voice responded "the very same. I hope your travels were pleasant. I don't much like the trains myself."

The girls nodded cordially.

"I wasn't expecting Juliet to send three of you," she continued, "but I'm sure I can find space for you. Has she told you about things?"

"A little bit," Prosper answered. "Some destroyed property, scared farmers?"

Hortensia seemed to search for her response. "I have much to share, but I learned just this afternoon there'd be a town gathering about it tonight."

“How serious is it?” Thea asked. “Foxes or something?”

Hortencia shook her head just slightly. Her way of speaking felt dated to Thea, like how her grandmother spoke when she was alive. “I’m no longer convinced it’s something natural, for I’ve never seen such destruction just from hungry animals.”

The younger witches exchanged concerned looks.

“That’s a bit ominous,” Lavinia complained.

Hortencia beckoned them with her hand. “You can hear it from the source, if you’d follow me to the church down yonder,” she explained. Wryly, she added “don’t be afeared, we won’t burst into flames, such as the scriptures tell it.”

Thea was worried all the same by the idea. They walked the tenth of a mile it took to reach the chapel. It was an altogether simple structure with a rectangular base, rows of pews, and a raised dais for grandstanding, exterior painted a fresh shade of virgin white. There was a ladder leading to a partial second floor with a bell and steeple. It was already brimming with agitated locals, pressing into the seats and standing along the rows. It was as full as Thea had ever seen it, and the mass of people only added to her anxiety.

“They’ll spot me for sure,” she whispered to Lavinia.

“You’re hardly recognizable, even from a few months ago,” Lavinia reassured her. “You can stand behind me and Prosper, if that would make you feel better.”

Shooting a worried glance at Prosper, Thea nodded and pressed her back against the wall of the room, letting the other two sidle in front of her.

The raucous assembly was called to order by a heavysset, balding man making his way to the lectern. Thea didn’t recognize him.

“I know we are all greatly agitated, right now,” he began in a shrill, wavering voice, “but I urge you all to be calm. We will get through this, as a community.”

“I’m going to lose my livelihood!” called an anonymous voice from the crowd. A few others whooped in agreement.

“No one is going to lose their farms,” the man insisted, “we are going to organize a watch, and we are-”

“So my boys can get eaten by that demon, instead of my cattle?” called a woman. Consent seemed to follow, and the crowd grew restless once more. Out of the crowd stepped a taller man, in a button-down plaid shirt and suspenders, cradling a heavy black book. He made for the podium and relieved the speaker of his burden. Thea felt nauseous at the sight of him.

“Brothers and sisters,” her father said, setting down his Scriptures and raising his arms to the ceiling. “I assure you there is no demon in that wood, only a demon in our hearts.”

His voice was loud and resonating. The crowd seemed taken in by his claim, and there were a few quiet calls of “here, here” from the audience. Women flailed handkerchiefs in agreement.

“Our Lord is reminding us not to become idle in our ways! The world has become so convenient now that it is easy to be ungrateful of the gifts we are given. It’s only through hardship that He tests us, and we show our true faith.”

The audience was quiet but for several folks with eyes closed, one hand up to receive whatever blessing was on offer.

“The barbed wire on your fences can’t keep the devil out of your hearts! That’s what He wants to show us, only His love can do that!” the passion in his voice was rising. “I urge you brothers and sisters, return to the power of prayer and we will be delivered from this!”

Thea, mortified, slipped out the front door under cover of the exultations. The others followed her. She rested with her hands on her knees, looking down at the ground, forcing herself to breathe.

“That’s my *father*!” Thea exclaimed.

Lavinia was taken aback. “Was he always a confessor?”

“No, not when I left, he was just a...mean old drunk.”

“Drunks are great at finding the Lord; turns out He lives in the bottom of bottles,” Prosper joked dryly.

Hortencia approached the girls, having also taken leave of the chapel. “I didn’t realize how desperate these lands had become,” she grieved. “I’d been coming into town less and less since they built the factory. Had I known, I wouldn’t have asked you all to come.”

“We don’t know for certain they’re *that* kind of congregation, do we?” Lavinia reasoned.

Hortencia’s nostrils flared. “They’re...well I think of them as mostly good folks. Better to be safe than sorry, with what’s going around.”

“We’ll have to be careful,” Prosper mused. “If the farmers are scared, and staying inside, we may be able to ward the surroundings without them noticing.”

“They won’t just stop working,” Thea responded. “Even if they’re afraid of a monster, they’re more scared of going hungry, and the fields need tended to. We’ll have to be discreet.”

“Awful lot of components to ward such a large area.”

“I should have what you need,” Hortencia commented.

“Provisions are well stocked.”

“Earlier you said it might be *unnatural*. How can you tell?” Thea asked, standing up straight.

Hortencia thought for a moment. “It’s the Skein itself. You know the way it feels, normally. On nights when *things* happen here, the Skein feels taut. Pulled in all sorts of directions. I feel it like an upset stomach.”

“Have you ever felt that before?”

“No, not in my life.”

The girls sat with that knowledge for a few moments. The sky above was turning orange and purple, it was about time for the streetlights to flicker into action. The court was still very much in session in the packed chapel, and Thea was surprised to hear footsteps coming from the other direction.

“Pardon me ladies, might I have some of your time?”

Thea wheeled around. There again was Elijah, notepad in hand, this time with a thin mustache running along his smug upper lip.

“Oh, my goodness, I wasn’t expecting you here! Miss...” he began.

“Theodora,” Thea finished quickly.

“Theodora! How could I forget that?” Elijah quipped. For once his ignorance was convenient. Thea forced a smile with all her might. “Well Theodora, what brings you out to Sheffield? I didn’t see your caravan, are you off the clock?”

Thea froze, but Hortencia picked up the slack. “This is my granddaughter, actually,” she fibbed. “Come home to visit. Picked a terrible time for it, but I guess that’s the way it is!”

“Quite right, strange times indeed ma’am,” Elijah replied. He spoke quickly and with affected airs of cordialness. “As you might have put together, I’m a reporter; rumor has it there’s some very strange goings on, perhaps a local legend in the making out here in Sheffield. Have you been personally affected?”

“Only inconvenienced by the tourists,” Hortencia responded in the most matronly tone. “I’m sure it’s just a bear or some foxes.”

“Could very well be, ma’am.”

“You’ve seen them, then?” Thea asked.

“Why yes,” Elijah grinned, “I’ve gotten photographs and everything.”

Recognizing the opportunity, Thea pressed. “Might I see them?”

Elijah laughed, a tone of nervousness in his voice. “They’re not all fit to print, you know, some very gruesome stuff.”

Thea internally seethed that this newsie thought her so delicate. Being underestimated, at least, might make getting his help easier.

“You don’t think it’s really a monster though, do you?” Thea pressed.

Elijah scoffed. "Of course not. Those kinds of monsters don't exist. There's a real, human explanation for all this."

"Still..." Thea feigned, "it's all quite scary. Folks don't really want to talk about it, you know? Could you show me sometime?"

After a moment, Elijah smiled, and clapped his notebook closed with a flourish. "Well...if you insist, I suppose. Just don't faint on me when you see them!" His smile told Thea he thought himself a real genius now. "I'm staying just down the way in that old inn, perhaps...you could come by tomorrow? I should have them all developed by then. Maybe you can tell me a little more about your "miracle tonic", while we're at it."

"I've already told you my recipe," Thea insisted, "pure magic."

"I'm sure you believe that, Miss," Elijah patronized.

The doors to the chapel opened, and as the townsfolk started filing out, Elijah rushed over to get more statements, not saying goodbye. Hortencia began walking the opposite way, and the girls followed.

"That guy's insufferable," Lavinia complained. Thea nodded her head in firm agreement.

Prosper was uncharacteristically pleased and looked at Thea approvingly. "We can let him gather our evidence for us - the mundane parts, anyway. I didn't think you had it in you."

"Had what?"

Prosper shrugged. "Charm? Guile?"

"Maybe you just never took the time to look." Thea picked up the pace.

It was dark by the time the witches reached Hortencia's cottage. It sat on top of a wooded hill about a mile south of town, serviced by a small dirt path with a gentle incline. The structure was a sharp "A" shape, with a chimney, and two outbuildings. The front had large square windows that made the whole home look like it had a face.

The interior was mostly open, and lacking electricity was lit with what Thea thought were oil lanterns. Inside was Hortencia's kitchen, with all manner of herbs hanging from hooks. Thea could identify that most of them were spell components. She had a spinning wheel and two large baskets of fabric. A ladder led to a partial second floor that collided with the vaulted ceiling. At the far end was a door leading to Hortencia's bedroom. The host made herself busy arranging an extra bed for her guests.

"This is exactly how I pictured a witch would live," Lavinia admired, "minus the gingerbread."

"It's beautiful," Prosper agreed.

"It's nothing much," Hortencia deflected, "but it suits me just fine. My nesting partner built it about two years back, but since they passed, I've kept to myself most of the time. I can grow most of what I need for my own purposes, and trade with the farmers for what I can't. Getting old has its perks, everyone hears that I live alone and thinks I need a favor!"

Thea inspected the lantern hanging in the kitchen. It cast a warm orange light, but it didn't flicker at all, and putting her hands near it, she felt no heat. Cautiously, she opened the glass panel and found inside a small stone, etched with a variety of runes only some of which she recognized.

"This is magic too?" she asked, incredulous.

"It's safer than oil," Hortencia answered, approaching and closing the panel. "Electricity's more convenient, I reckon, but I'm about done learning new tricks. I could teach you that one sometime.

After having a laugh at her own joke, she continued. "You girls are welcome to whatever you need from my stores; it's a big job."

"I have another question," Thea interjected, thoughtlessly.

"I have an answer," Hortencia smiled.

"Why do you feel obliged to help them? The people in Sheffield, I mean. You only moved here recently, and they...well, you see how...they preach. Do you think they'd do the same for you?"

As soon as she finished, Thea's cheeks felt red hot. She realized that was a terrible, awkward question to ask.

Hortencia smiled and paused for a moment. "Good deeds are good, no matter who you're doing them for. Maybe one day they'll pay it back, or maybe they won't. Only doing something good because there's a reward waiting for you at the end...well that sounds a little like their religion, doesn't it?"

Thea smiled at Hortencia's answer, relieved. "I'm sorry if that was too forward. I'm...I'm from Sheffield, you see, and I couldn't wait to see the back of it when I left. Seeing someone come in and just...care, that's surprising to me."

"Not too forward at all. I appreciate someone that speaks their mind."

"I guess I never learned how not to."

The girls made their beds and did their best to sleep. Thea was continually caught in half-sleep; she'd be drifting off and suddenly a noise, or a feeling, would violently yank her back to her body, eyelids open and mind lucid. It was deeply frustrating. She finally threw in the towel and got to her feet, quietly, so as not to wake anyone else. She tip-toed around Lavinia, who was sleeping in a bundle of quilts and blankets nearby.

She stepped cautiously into the cool night air. The trees had been cleared away enough to make a window into the night sky, which was partially cloudy. Clouds passed over the moon and were illuminated, like a lunar lamp shade. She had just started to take it in when she realized Prosper was already there. She was sitting with her legs pressed to her chest, staring up at the sky, fingers toying with a twig. Her hair was out of its usual braid, and the moonlight gave it the same splendor as a spider's web caught in the morning sun.

Prosper looked over to acknowledge Thea. Thea spread out a blanket and took a seat. Both thought about saying something, but neither could manage it. Finally, Thea tried.

"Thank you for your coat, earlier," Thea said. "I couldn't say it then, but I appreciated it."

Prosper paused, considered, and replied “of course. You’re feeling better?”

“I’m feeling a lot.”

Prosper tossed away the twig she had been fiddling with. “I...can’t imagine how it feels to be in your position right now. I just empathize.”

“I think that’s the first time you’ve ever admitted to not knowing something,” Thea smirked. “It’s not home for me, anymore. I’m from here, but my home is back with the coven.”

“Mm hmm. I guess, about last night. I didn’t mean to make you...” she caught herself, “that’s not true. I did mean to make you feel bad, and unwelcome. I wouldn’t have said that if I wasn’t trying to be hurtful. That was wrong of me.”

Thea perked up, and looked at Prosper, not entirely sure how to accept or reject that notion.

“Why?” she managed to ask.

“Why am I sorry, or why was I being a bitch?”

“Both, if you’re taking requests.”

Prosper laughed, a little melancholic. “At the time I did mean it, mostly. That you’d be a liability. I think I have a lot of luxury, living in the coven, being actively a witch for so long, I take a lot of it for granted.” She gestured vaguely towards Sheffield. “Then I saw all *this*...I felt a little ashamed of myself.”

“How so?”

“Oliver told me a long time ago that ‘community is the most important thing we have as witches.’ I’m not very good at practicing that, clearly. You were right earlier, too.”

“About what?” Thea asked, hooked on her words.

“I *hadn’t* taken the time to look. Seeing you handle yourself tonight, with everything going on- I was wrong to be mistrustful of you, and cruel to express it in the way I did.”

Thea felt tears coming towards her eyes, but she was far too determined not to look emotional in front of Prosper. “Thank you

for that. For what it's worth, I'm sorry I threatened to knock your teeth out."

That got a chuckle out of Prosper. With an impish grin, she added "it's cute you think you could."

Thea flushed, excitedly reaching back into her country vernacular. "I'd lay your ass out!"

Prosper stood up, brushing out her skirt of the detritus collected on it. She extended her hand towards Thea. "If we don't get killed out here, we can have a fight when we get back to the cottage. Until then, how about a truce?"

Thea sat still, making a show of it. "Oh, fine. Since you asked nicely."

Even in the relative dark, Thea could tell Prosper rolled her eyes.

"Are you tired yet?"

Thea shrugged. "No, not really."

"Me either. Will it bother you if I'm out here with you?"

Thea patted the ground next to her. "Be my guest."

Seven

“Are you sure about this?” Lavinia asked. Sheffield had apparently begun attracting enough traffic to warrant an inn, a two-story building with a wraparound porch and off-center front door. Thea was almost certain this used to be an abandoned house her mother had told her not to play in- which she did once, regardless- but renovated and with a new coat of offensively bright green paint. Elijah was staying upstairs.

“It’s better than going door to door,” Thea reasoned, “and I don’t want to get recognized.”

“I understand that, but are you sure you want to go up alone?”

Thea nodded. “He’s a pain, but he’s harmless. Prosper could use your help with the protective circle, anyway.”

“Alright, but just scream if anything goes wrong. Yell ‘fire!’ I was always told they come quicker for fire.”

“For fire?” Thea asked.

“Yeah, like if a man is...you know,” Lavinia explained.

“Oh...,” Thea gathered. “That’s a bit backwards, isn’t it?”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Lavinia said, changing tact. She gave Thea a quick squeeze and started off for the fields. “Just in case- ‘fire!’ I’ll be listening.”

Thea couldn’t help but laugh. With a deep breath, she walked up the stairs and into the structure. The interior confirmed her suspicions- this was recently that abandoned house. The paint was fresh, and electrical lighting had been added. With a nervous wave at the woman working the front desk, she hurried upstairs. Elijah’s room was one of three, and easy to find as he’d left the door open.

The trappings were sparse. Along the walls were the awkward, mass-produced art of nature scenes that looked nothing like Sheffield at all. There was a bed, which looked plush, an armchair, and a writing desk absolutely packed full of papers and baubles. To the side was a camera, a small black square with a few holes for lenses and a leather strap affixed to the top. Its tripod leaned against the wall. Elijah was waiting, enjoying a morning cigarette that he quickly snuffed as Thea peeked into the room.

“Miss Theodora! Good morning, please come in,” he motioned with an affected air.

“Good morning,” she replied. He stood and offered her the chair, which she declined.

“I believe I promised you some photographs,” he continued, motioning towards the desk. “I’ve got a little snapshot camera here that’s solid quality. I’d like to get a color one eventually, but seeing as the newspaper prints in black and white, I don’t think I could get my editor to sign off on that expense.”

Small black-and-white photographs were laid across the desk, each about two inches square. Lacking contrast, it was hard to spot smaller details. In the first, Thea saw destroyed fencing. The wood and barbed-wire boundary looked like an automobile had driven through it. In the second, a hen house was torn to pieces. Feathers and what looked like bits of bird were strewn through the image, and it looked as though blood had been wiped all over what was left of the coop. In the final one, a poor cow was laid on its side, in what looked like a barn. Its stomach was torn open and entrails strewn about the hay. It made Thea feel sick.

“This is unbelievable.”

“It’s sure gruesome,” Elijah added. “I can see why farmers are scared. I suspect it’s rowdy workers from the factory down the way. A lot of young men with no entertainment, they’re bound to make their own. Boys being boys and all that.”

“Boys being boys?”

“Well,” Elijah reconsidered, “this is a little more reprehensible. It might also- and you can call me crazy - be an effort from the factory bosses, trying to scare folks off their land. Buy it up on the cheap.”

“You think they’d do that?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Elijah continued, “I’ve covered two others that have tried. One was caught, one wasn’t. The one that was caught was too obvious, they tried to shut off water to the nearby tenements, saying they bought the water rights to the whole neighborhood.”

“That’s horrific,” Thea exclaimed.

“Monsters are a creative fiction, Miss. There’s nothing lurking out there with long claws and sharp teeth. It’s humans, and human greed, that make for real monsters.”

Thea took one more look over the photographs. The cow looked like it’d been gnawed upon, around the stomach. The neck wasn’t cut, it was torn. It didn’t look like something humans could, or would, do.

“I understand where you’re coming from, but I don’t agree,” Thea responded, not looking at Elijah. She thought back to what Hortencia had said about the Skein last night.

“What do you mean?”

“Humans can be absolutely rotten to each other, but that doesn’t mean they’re the only explanation.”

“Do you believe in boogeymen as well as magic, Miss Theodora?” Elijah asked. “See I don’t believe in either. I don’t believe *you* believe in either. I think you’re an example of- or maybe your boss is an example of- human greed hurting people.”

Thea erupted. It was one thing to disrespect her, but she wouldn’t tolerate one bad word about Oliver. She wheeled around towards Elijah and put her index finger in his sternum.

“You know, you’re the worst kind of man! Even when I’m telling you the truth, you don’t believe a word of it.”

This seemed to take Elijah by surprise. Thea continued.

“You have to put everything in a box, so you can understand it. So your view of the world doesn’t break. Well, there’s things out there you don’t understand. I’m not a scam artist, and neither is Oliver,” she fumed. “Sometimes you can only understand by experiencing it. It’s not enough to read or write about it. To define it.”

Elijah’s face screwed up to offer a response, but the usually loquacious reporter seemed unable to find the words. He was mercifully silent, for once.

“Thanks for showing me your photographs,” Thea added. As her rage faded, she grew embarrassed at her reaction, and blood began to run to her cheeks. She had a desire to disappear as fast as possible, and hurried out of the inn.

She caught up with the others to the north of town. Here the fields petered out and were replaced by gently sloping hills that soon sprouted tall, deciduous trees. Thea knew them well, having played in and around them much of her childhood. There were a few foot trails leading to blackberry bushes, or a swimming spot a bit further in. Her father and the other men of the village often hunted in the woods but cautioned their children not to go too far in, for fear of them getting lost. Besides that, the lack of a good waterway meant that logging had never developed in the area, and because of the hills and rocky soil, farmers weren’t keen to encroach on the forest either. Thea knew the forest was miles wide and miles deep, and as she searched her memory, she wondered how little of it she’d actually seen.

Prosper was crouched down on the dirt path circling the fields, carving the rune for *security* into the young oak wood of a retaining fence.

“You can read that?” Prosper asked. Lavinia peered over her shoulder.

“It’s legible,” she agreed.

Thea rifled around in her travel pouch to produce a bottle of mugwort, dissolved in alcohol and cured under the moon. Prosper

dabbled it along the runes to set them in place, and over them smeared a few flowers of *hypericum perforatum*.

“How’s it coming?” Thea asked.

“Slowly,” Lavinia replied. “There’s so much ground to cover. We’ll probably go back for more lavender soon. How was the reporter?”

“Oafish, but the pictures were good at least. He seems convinced that it’s factory workers from down the way coming over to cause problems, but it sure looks to me like something inhuman.”

“There were some fences that weren’t yet fixed,” Prosper added. “If I were here for sport, I’d simply jump the fence. It’s only designed to keep out animals.”

Thea felt something run up her spine, cold and damp. She intuited correctly that it wasn’t physical, but a disturbance through the Skein. The others looked just as uncomfortable. If the Skein usually felt like the surface of a lake, it felt now like a rainstorm- hundreds of drops hitting and disturbing the surface, one after another, cascading. It affected Thea like a panic- she felt the urge to run, but her body was heavy. Her stomach churned like a stone had been dropped into it.

“D’you feel that?”

They nodded. It continued for another few agonizing moments, and then it passed. As it receded, Thea realized she was sweating profusely.

“That’s what Hortencia was talking about,” Lavinia surmised.

“That was miserable,” Prosper concluded grimly. “There’s something we don’t understand at work here.”

“Like, another witch?” Thea asked, genuinely.

Prosper was unusually timid in response. “Probably not. Humans aren’t the only things connected to the Skein, at least not traditionally.”

“A spirit or something?”

“I don’t know. Some witches pray to spirits, or worship, or commune with other entities- but I don’t know *who* this is. There are

many possibilities. A lot of our written history is lost, and our spiritual practices are similarly fragmented.”

“Do you believe in that?” Thea asked.

“I believe there’s things about magic I don’t understand. Yet, anyway,” Prosper sighed. “I don’t believe in demons or devils or whatever nonsense we’re said to be doing in the Scriptures. That’s just an effort to dehumanize us.”

“Clearly,” Lavinia added. “Very few of us survived the earlier hunts, there’s not much record of how we *used* to understand the rest of the Skein. Not every witch is going to meet the same...spirit, or entity, or what have you.”

“If we hide for our safety,” Thea posited, “could they be doing the same?”

Prosper thought for a moment. “Almost certainly. We as humans blend in better.”

“What are the odds it's friendly to us?” Thea added on.

The three exchanged glances. Prosper shrugged.

“It has more in common with us than anyone else,” Lavinia proposed.

“If our protective spells are good enough, it won’t matter. Speaking of- we’re slacking off,” Prosper said.

Toiling in the hot sun, back in Sheffield, Thea was pleased that it reminded her less of being a child and more of being back at the coven stead, working in the greenhouse. The girls planned to finish a ring around the fields, doubling up their runes around areas with barns or other livestock, which Thea pointed out. Their work continued through midday, when they finally exhausted their pouches with another third of the town left to cover. They trudged back towards Hortencia’s to restock and finish their work, legs heavy.

Hortencia was waiting for them with tea, sandwiches and pickled vegetables for lunch. Famished, the girls ate too ravenously to hold a conversation. It was delicious, and Thea was grateful for the break. Once she’d wiped the last crumbs from her face, she was the first one to say what everyone was thinking.

“We felt it, Hortencia. In the Skein.”

The older woman shook her head, wrinkles furrowing in her brow. “I was hoping it was just me.”

“Do you have any idea what it is?”

“I don’t *know*,” she intoned, “but I’ve heard things. Many witches, many years. I’ve heard of many nature deities, some local, others far-reaching.”

“You mean to tell me there’s a god in the woods, coming out to eat people’s cows?” Prosper said, incredulous.

Hortencia smiled, unbothered. “What is it?” is the wrong question. If it’s something inherently magical, it might have existed for as long as the dirt itself. The question should be ‘why now?’”

Silence came over them as everyone reflected on it in their own way.

“Is it angry?”

“That’s what I’ve been losing sleep over,” Hortencia said. “I needed someone else here, to feel it, to see if I’m just losing it in my old age. Please don’t feel like you have to stay. You’ve acquitted yourselves, and I can’t ask you to put yourselves in danger for this.”

The others traded glances.

“Thea, what do you think? This is the hardest on you,” Lavinia asked, quietly.

Thea bit at her cuticles. She thought about the panicked faces in the chapel last night, and her father’s twisted prayers. She thought about the pictures Elijah had shown her. She remembered being a little girl in this town, and all the memories that brought back. Most of all, she thought about what Hortencia had said last night.

“I want to stay.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” she resolved. “No matter how I feel about the place. They deserve to be safe, too.”

Lavinia smiled broadly. “I thought the same thing.”

“If there’s something out there no one’s seen before, I have to be there for it,” Prosper added, confidently. “I’ll stay.”

Hortencia smiled, clearly relieved. “Just know that your answers aren’t final. You can revoke that choice at any time, and no one will judge you.”

The girls restocked their pouches and went back to town with renewed conviction. It was late afternoon, but Thea estimated they could squeeze another hour or two of work in. The fields were sparse at this time of year, as all the planting was complete and the harvesting yet to begin, and she felt comfortable they’d not look too conspicuous. Lavinia took Thea’s hand in hers, and they walked like that until they got to the main thoroughfare.

They were far from the most interesting commotion on Sheffield’s lone street. Outside of the inn, a group had formed around a woman. She was sobbing the quiet, tired convulsions of someone who had nearly cried themselves out. Concerned, the girls approached.

“Has something happened?” Prosper asked, her voice a honeyed version of its normal tone, gilded in friendly airs.

Quietly, one of the men said, “her son’s been taken.”

“Taken?” Prosper clarified. The woman began crying earnestly again, wailing.

“He’s been taken by the beast! I forbid him to leave the house!” she cried, hysterical.

Prosper looked back at the others, then quietly disengaged the group. The witches hurried north towards the forest, breaking into a run once they were clear of prying eyes.

“We have to look for him, right?” Lavinia urged, pulling up her skirt slightly so she didn’t trip over its hem.

“Yes!” Thea nearly shouted.

“We don’t know that he was taken,” Prosper cautioned, “he could have walked off on his own. Could be playing in the woods.”

“Then we’ll find him more easily! I know every path through this wood. If he’s off on his own, I can find him,” Thea reasoned.

Prosper looked like she was about to argue but bit her lip. She nodded in agreement.

“That’s fine, but we can’t all go. What if he comes back of his own accord, and we’re off in the woods all night? What if something else happens, and we’re not here to see it?”

Thea felt this was reasonable. “I have to be one of the ones that goes.”

“I should be the other,” Prosper reasoned.

“Why?” Lavinia asked, offended.

“If there’s trouble, I can protect us both,” Prosper answered coolly.

“I don’t need protecting, Prosper,” Thea argued.

“You say that now. Either way I want to go in there and see for myself.”

“What am I even supposed to do if he comes back? Run in and find you?” Lavinia argued.

“We’ll mark our path with chalk. It’s not as nice as a trail of breadcrumbs but I think it’ll work just as well,” Prosper reasoned. “Either you come to get us, or we can at least find our way out.”

Thea and Lavinia looked at each other, certain Prosper wasn’t backing down about this. With a sigh, Lavinia leaned over and planted a kiss on Thea’s cheek. Thea, still indignant, realized she’d have to manage this alone.

“Be safe. I’ll get Hortencia and we’ll keep an eye out.”

“Thank you both,” Prosper said, genuinely. “Lead the way, Thea.”

They reached the outskirts of the town and scampered up the hills, along a well-worn path flanked by thistles. This time of year the trees were full of green leaves, and they blotted out the sunlight increasingly as they went in. Thea led the way and was relieved to find she remembered her surroundings so well. She first led them to the streams, where she hoped to find the missing boy swimming. It took the better part of an hour to hike that distance. The air around them grew more acrid, and Thea felt like pinching her nose shut.

They arrived finally at a large pool, fed by a small waterfall perhaps ten feet high, and draining slowly down a small rivulet that

led south. The smell was foul here, and there was a sheen on the surface of the water. A dead raccoon wasted a few paces away from the water where Thea remembered diving in from.

“What happened here?” she whispered.

“He’s not here,” Prosper reckoned.

“No, but the *water*, it wasn’t like this.” Thea hurried along the perimeter of the pond and scrambled up to the top of the waterfall. There was a steep drop to the north of this small, rocky plateau after about one hundred yards. Thea made it to the edge and peered down at the forest. In the distance, she could see the billowing vapors from the many spiraling smokestacks of the factory below.

Prosper caught up after some laborious climbing and took in the same view.

“Nothing else has changed,” Thea bemoaned.

“You’re of a mind that it’s connected?”

“Do springs just turn to sulfur on their own? This has been here for generations and now it’s just...poisoned.”

“I’m sorry for your...loss,” Prosper answered, not quite sure of what to call it.

“It’s fine,” Thea shrugged. “I didn’t think I’d ever see the place again when I left. I guess seeing it now, like this...just hurts the memories I had of it.”

“Maybe this is rich coming from me, but I am sorry.” Prosper reassured her, in a tone that felt genuine and sweet- at least as sweet as Prosper had shown herself capable of being. Thea was surprised.

“Doesn’t solve our problem,” Thea added. “We should keep going.”

The sun was getting low on the horizon, and the sky became pale shades of purple and orange. The leaves cut the heavens into segmented patterns, like stained glass. Thea led them down from the waterfall, about a half mile to a fork in the path. Prosper rubbed away the chalk markings so as not to confuse Lavinia if she came looking.

“He didn’t go swimming. If he was picking blackberries, he’d have gone up that way,” Thea indicated.

“What if he was taken by something?” Prosper asked, baldly.

“Then I imagine he’d be further in,” Thea answered. “The hills get steeper, and the woods get denser. There are no proper trails going in, though men from Sheffield do sometimes hunt up that way.”

“So, there might be a stretch of woods no one has seen?”

“There *might* be.”

Prosper looked around, then gestured up the slope to the northwest. “Shall we?”

Thea felt in her stomach another wave in the Skein, like a large rock had been dropped through the surface, and the resulting ripples beat waves against the shore. The unease lasted less than a minute but stood the hairs on her neck on end.

“Let’s hurry.”

The forest changed as they marched further in, but more than anything, it got older. The trees were taller and thicker, their canopies denser and taking up more of the fading evening light. The undergrowth was crowded and the soil loamier, as years of undisturbed decay had covered the ground with the building blocks of growth. The witches had to make their own path through the brush as the trail had long since ended. Prosper paused to find a suitable branch among the detritus, and scratching a few runes into it, lit it as a torch. Thea scanned the ground as they walked, hoping for any sort of clue. Every few minutes, Prosper would call out and hope for a response.

Their luck finally turned when Thea noticed a fresh footprint, disturbing the loam. Excitedly, Thea pushed them forward in pursuit. The footprints were placed far apart and led over the crest of a hill after about fifty paces. On the other side, they continued for another few yards before ending abruptly. One small, well-worn shoe was still there, next to a tree clearly marked by something large and clawed—the bark was torn, and jagged strips had been taken out of the tree beneath.

“Shit.” Prosper whispered.

Thea bit her lip. “We have to be sure, right?”

Prosper nodded. “Just in case.”

The two continued, heading down into the small valley. The last fingers of sunset had lost their grip on the sky and the light of Prosper’s torch was all they could see by.

The feeling in her stomach came again, and Thea shivered. There was a brisk wind which extinguished Prosper’s torch and nearly blew Thea off her feet. She reached out for Prosper, finding her hand. As their eyes adjusted to the pale, insufficient light provided by the moon and stars, they saw they weren’t alone.

Before them was the lip of the small depression they were in, maybe seventy-five feet away. Atop it, silhouetted by the light, was a stranger. It stood on two legs that bent the wrong way, like a goat’s, and atop its head was a set of antlers, most like an elk’s. Next to it, and considerably shorter than it, were two canines. Thea couldn’t identify them clearly from this distance. Closer to them, Thea saw more sets of eyes, reflecting light. The stranger spoke in a voice very similar to the one Thea had heard in her meeting with the Skein- a chorus rather than a single voice. This one was altogether more rough.

“Why are you in my forest?”

Prosper thought quickly and worked to relight the torch.

Nervously, a dumbfounded Thea managed an answer.

“We’re from Sheffield! We’re looking for a lost child.”

“You want to kill me and my flock,” the creature answered, even-keeled, calm and firm.

Prosper hoisted the torch, and Thea could see how much danger they were in. No more than ten steps away there circled two wolves, heads low, eyes fixed on the witches. She hadn’t heard them approach.

“We *don’t*!” Prosper insisted. She pointed the torch outwards, brandishing it at the wolves. They seemed reluctant to approach it.

“Are you destroying their fields?” Thea asked, voice quivering.

“I’m speaking the only language they understand,” the creature intoned.

“Maybe you’re not speaking to the right humans,” Thea insisted. “We’re witches. We can feel you, in the Skein.”

Before she could get a solid answer, a wolf lunged towards them. Reflexively, Prosper swung her torch to ward it off. The wolf, in apparent fear, turned back and retreated. Prosper dropped the light and it fell to the ground, again extinguished. She heard a snarl from another beast nearby, and could tell they were closing in.

Thea felt almost frozen in place. The air was too heavy, her clothes were damp with sweat and uncomfortably tight on her skin. She needed to leave immediately. This time, she recognized the feeling for what it was. With her left hand, she grabbed Prosper’s trembling wrist, and with her right, she reached out for the doorknob she knew would be there. She pushed it open and fell through.

They fell only a short distance and landed in a hay bale. Thea could tell without opening her eyes, she remembered well how it felt to lay on one. She had landed on her back, and Prosper on top of her, in a heap of skirts and sweat.

She took a moment to get her bearings. Her leg was curled underneath her, uncomfortably, and all of Prosper’s weight was on top of her. Prosper’s hand was on her chest, and her face near enough to feel her breath. She lingered for a moment, looking at Thea incredulously.

Thea, panting, swallowed and asked, “do you think you’d like to get off of me?”

Prosper caught her breath. “I might.”

She raised herself off of Thea and sat for a moment on her hips. She flipped her disheveled hair back over her shoulders. She looked pensive, and her eyes studied Thea. Finally, she laughed.

“I could just about kiss you right now, Theodora.”

Thea raised an eyebrow. “You wouldn’t.”

Prosper leaned over, holding her hair back with one hand, and pressed her lips to Thea's. Thea's surprise faded and she let herself appreciate it, though it was brief. When Prosper finally pulled away, Thea's heart was racing.

"Alright," Prosper said, standing up and brushing out her skirt. "I probably have some explaining to do."

Thea stood up as well and surveyed her surroundings. She thought she recognized where they were, and looking out the second-story doors confirmed it.

"Oh dammit," she groaned, exasperated, "I took us to my family's barn."

"So, where did you come from?" Thea asked. She was handling the hay bale a lot more comfortably than Prosper. "I guess I had it in my head that you were rich, growing up."

Prosper's face gave the smallest indication of a flinch. "I had a fine upbringing, materially. I was educated, and pampered...it's just that my parents were never around. I think it all turned me on them, in retrospect- I had everything but love, and that's what I came to crave."

"When I was a teenager, I ran away with a man. I thought he was adoring, and mature, and that he had a plan to take care of me. It turned out he was older, and manipulative, and I didn't see that at the time. I still hate how gullible I was."

"Do you think that's why it's hard for you to warm up to people now?"

Prosper considered, then nodded. "I'm sure that's part of it. When that fell apart, I couldn't go back home, so I decided I'd make it work somehow."

"How did you manage?"

Prosper snorted like she was laughing at herself. "I got into that situation because I was pretty, and dumb, so I continued to be pretty and dumb. I was touring the bedrooms of older men in the South Hills neighborhood. I replaced my sweetheart with another,

then another, then finally settled in with the third man that would take me in. I still remember the color of most of their sheets.”

“Prosper...” Thea reassured, reaching over to squeeze her leg. Prosper put her hand over Thea’s and held onto her, tenderly.

“It wasn’t all bad. It was genuinely easy living, being a...pet. Clean the house, sometimes nude, cook dinner, do my “wifely” duties. Just...dreadfully boring. I spent my free time in his reading room, where I found a few books on magic. Purely speculative, hardly any real insight into the occult. It got me curious, though, and one day when I met Oliver by chance, selling potions, I asked him to teach me how to make them.”

“Just like that?”

“I also stole a small fortune of his late wife’s jewelry and changed my name,” Prosper shrugged. “What else is a girl to do?”

Thea shrugged in response. “Not like she was wearing it.”

Prosper let out a deep laugh. She looked Thea over, smiling hollowly, and spoke up.

“I think I was so cold towards you because you seemed so full of the love I wish I had. I thought my callousness was some kind of self-defense, but really, I built a weapon of it and hurt you. I’m sorry for that, Thea.”

“I forgive you, Prosper,” Thea smiled. “I said some mean things to you too. You’re not all wrong, either- I think part of me *does* need to be liked. It did injure me that you seemed so opposed to it.”

“You’re very likable. I apologize that it took a near-death experience to accept that.” Prosper sighed. “I can be a bitch sometimes.”

“Keep it down to *sometimes*, okay?”

Prosper smiled ruefully. “Don’t tell me how to behave.”

Thea smiled back. “Was that kiss something you really wanted, or was it just in the moment?”

“It’s something I enjoyed,” she responded, “and something I would do again. If ever you’re interested.”

Thea paused. “We’ll need to talk about it. For now, we should start with getting back, I’m sure the others are worried about us.”

Thea got up and walked to the edge of the hay loft. Below her she could see a few stacked bales ready to be fed to the cattle. Giggling, she jumped down into one, landing on her rear and bouncing back to her feet. She motioned for Prosper to do the same, and she followed nervously. The commotion roused one of the animals, which started mooing.

“Oh shit,” Thea exclaimed, “let’s hurry, this is not a good place to get caught.”

They hurried out and over the fence towards Hortencia’s. Thea realized this was a lot more dramatic than the first time she left home and couldn’t help but smile as she jogged after Prosper.

Eight

“I know we have more important things to go over,” Thea started. The morning was young as the three witches huddled around Hortencia’s table, stocks of components piled before them for sorting and preparing. Thea had slept fitfully after they reconnected last night, but her nerves kept her moving through her lack of rest.

“Something on your mind?” Lavinia asked. Her sweet voice, usually soothing to Thea, scared the daylight out of her.

“Yes. I...I am *really* not good at talking about my feelings, so I am going to lay them out without any thought, and hope no one is hurt,” Thea began. Her gaze was fixed down at her hands, which traced compulsively the grooves of the table’s wooden surface. “I care very strongly for the both of you and I don’t know what to do about it!”

The room was silent. Lavinia looked at Prosper, back at Thea. Prosper smirked, looked at Lavinia, then back to Thea.

“Yes?” Lavinia asked, with a slight smile.

“Yes, precisely yes, I...that’s...” Thea began to motion with her hands like her point was manifest, but even that wasn’t getting her anywhere. “Isn’t three a crowd?”

“You know I feel strongly for you, Thea,” Lavinia reassured, “and that’s not pre-conditioned on my being the *only* object of your affection.”

Thea was dumbfounded. “Really?” she managed to ask, in a squeaky voice.

Prosper finally laughed and spoke up. “Thea, you are a *witch*. You bend reality to your whim with ancient magic. You’ve seen a whole world of things most people couldn’t dream of. *Please*, don’t

limit your imagination to only fancying one girl at a time,” she laughed. “You know I have feelings for you as well.”

“When we’re in a little less mortal danger, we can talk more about how that will look,” Lavinia assured, “but just know your feelings aren’t a problem, Thea.”

Thea felt herself about to cry. She beamed and nodded enthusiastically. The other two got closer and gave her a collective hug.

“Thank you both for listening,” she exhaled, “and for squeezing my soul back into my body. I think I can talk business now.”

“Anytime,” Lavinia playfully answered. “If I recall correctly, you both had a run in with...”

“- the spirit of the forest. I think. Or a local god, if we’re being generous,” Prosper answered.

“It had antlers, and goat legs, and it was tall. It spoke how the Skein spoke to me, during my naming ritual- like a lot of different voices speaking at once,” Thea added.

“Get what you bargained for, Prosper?” Lavinia asked.

Prosper’s cheeks went a faint shade of red. “More than. We only escaped with Thea’s magic.”

“I think we were just misunderstood,” Thea replied.

“We were about to be eaten by wolves,” Prosper corrected.

“I’m sure that whatever it is, it’s angry, but we just have to convince it we’re not the problem.”

“It’s the factory, right? You mentioned the water has turned foul,” Lavinia clarified.

Thea nodded.

“Thea, do you think you can open those doors at will, now?” Prosper asked. “Your control is a lot better than when you first joined the coven.”

“‘At will’ isn’t the right phrase for it. I can notice when it’s happening now and control it better. It’s still a response to stress or

danger, but last night I was alert enough to see it and I...directed it. I told it where to put us- more or less," Thea said.

"So, if we all went back to the forest, and we were in danger, could we escape?" Lavinia asked.

Thea looked at them both for a moment. Lavinia's warm and understanding eyes, Prosper's pensive and focused stare. They trusted *her*. She'd cast her first intentional spell a few months ago, and now they trusted their safety to her magical abilities.

"Yes. I can do it," she answered emphatically.

"Fantastic. It's not just about convincing it we aren't the problem; we have to give it a way to fix the problem. That's why it's lashing out, and we can't ignore that," Prosper reasoned. "Thea, can we convince your reporter friend that the factory's poisoning the water?"

"If we took him to the water, he'd see it for himself," she answered, "and he's not my friend!"

"Do you think it would be enough?" Lavinia asked.

Prosper shrugged. "We don't have much else to offer. If it has other ideas, we can hear them out."

"It's worth trying. The people in Sheffield are getting the brunt of both problems. We might be able to solve both. I wouldn't feel right not trying."

"Sometimes trying is all we can do," Lavinia reasoned. "I'm with you."

"I'm with you, too - but let's go back better prepared this time. Just in case."

The door of the cottage swung open, and Hortencia stepped in with three wooden dowels, each about two feet long, and deposited them on the table.

"I had to cannibalize a chair, but these should make better torches," she declared.

"We could have helped you with that," Lavinia said, concerned. Hortencia waved her off.

"I'm old, but I'm not broke," she laughed.

The witches got to work preparing. Herbs were burned, stones were purified, seals were set. Prosper used chalk to draw a pentacle into Hortencia's table, and the group collectively empowered protective charms for themselves, holding hands and chanting in unison. Hortencia showed them parts of her magical alphabet, which had some differences to the runes Thea knew. She incorporated a few of Hortencia's into the protective charm around her neck.

After eating an anxious lunch, the girls were ready. They bid farewell to Hortencia and loaded up their supplies, Prosper carrying the unlit torches in a canvas sack to be inconspicuous. As they passed through town, Thea noticed there was already a crowd of visitors at the chapel. Thea hoped they'd only be praying over one lost soul tonight, and not another three.

The path up was as they left it, and most of Prosper's chalk markings had survived. The trip was still arduous, and Thea's thighs already burned from the effort the night before, but at least she knew where she was going. They had barely breached the perimeter of the woods when she felt the familiar tug in her stomach from the Skein, stronger than usual. Prosper put her hand to her midsection and Lavinia grimaced. Thea thought for a moment to pull back, to tug on her own string.

Though it was painful, she forced herself to focus on it and draw up the Skein like she was preparing to cast a spell. It felt like cupping water into her hands, and letting it cascade down from the spaces in between her fingers. She just barely got some of it to her mouth. She spoke loudly "I'm just here to talk to you!"

The rumbling stopped, abruptly. The girls were silent.

"Was that you?" Lavinia asked, nudging her.

Thea nodded.

"I think it heard you."

"I hope that's a good thing."

They kept going, underneath the elder trees and their broad canopies, over brush that they'd stepped through the night before. They took a pause to rest after what felt like hours. Thea sank to the ground and leaned against a thick-barked hickory tree. Her feet were killing her.

It was then they noticed they weren't alone. Some fifty feet away, resting on its stomach, was an adolescent wolf. It watched them passively, relaxed. Once all the witches had taken notice, Lavinia bent down to one knee and tried to signal it to her.

The animal rose calmly, stretched out, and began to walk further into the forest.

"We're supposed to follow," Prosper whispered, getting on her way.

They followed it at a respectful distance. It led them up steep slopes that at times had Thea grasping to support herself on the titanic tree roots that grew exposed from the side of the hills. They continued like that for almost an hour, with the witches heaving and panting behind the beast that seemed indifferent to their struggle. They reached at last another plateau, where the elevation leveled off. It was remarkably clear on top but for a thick copse of trees positioned near the center.

There were other animals here- Thea noticed the black bear first, who lounged calmly near the trees, but he was accompanied by more wolves, and a few foxes. Several stood and shook out their coats as the witches approached.

The familiar, overlapping voice spoke to them then.

"If you have come to talk, I will listen to you. I heard you in the Skein."

Thea looked at the others. Prosper had a visible look of relief while Lavinia was incredulous, almost smiling while she observed the animals.

"That's me, I guess," Thea sighed. Raising her voice, she called "Okay! Where?"

“You are welcome in my grove, but you must come alone,” it intoned.

Thea was still. Prosper tapped her on the back.

“Go on, we’re going to be okay here,” she reassured.

Thea took a deep breath and walked forward. Their guide animal followed her towards the edge of the trees, but no further. She understood and pushed forward on her own. The dogwood trees were densely packed, and felt to Thea intentionally designed, somehow- like their growth hadn’t been natural. When she got through, she was in a clearing. It was perhaps the length of a city block and just as wide, but circular. Inside were more wolves, and foxes, and the creature she’d been speaking to. Its posture was relaxed. It reclined on its rear, one knee arched up.

The late afternoon sunlight showed the strange thing much better than the previous evening. The antlers and goat legs were still there, but Thea could see now the creature was covered in a coat of black and brown fur. Its eyes faced forward like a human’s would, but the features were goatish- a protruded snout and slit nostrils. It had the floppy ears of a goat as well. It was remarkably tall even when sitting down.

“Hello,” Thea started, unsure of herself. “I’m Thea... I’m a witch.”

“Welcome to my glade,” it responded. Its mouth did not move.

“What are you?” she asked.

“I...,” it calmly considered, “I think you could understand, but I don’t have time to explain. There is so much context you’re missing. The distance between you and I, is the same distance between you and someone who’s never seen real magic. Perhaps greater. Suffice to say, there are things beyond your comprehension in this world.”

“I heard you’re a local god,” she said, “one of the old ones. Or maybe the spirit of this forest. Come to protect it.”

The creature gave no answer but offered something else. Its voice was the same layered, undefinable chorus that Thea remembered from her initiation ceremony. “You can call me Miiitra.”

“We can’t be so different, Miiitra,” Thea continued. “We’re both magic, in some way. You speak my language.”

“I am speaking *through* magic. Tugging at the strings of the Skein to make music your ears can comprehend. You wouldn’t understand me otherwise.”

“I’d like to understand you at all, if you’d let me,” Thea responded.

Miiitra paused at this. One of the wolves broke from its rest to approach Thea. Her breaths became shallower, but she stayed still and steady.

“I think we had a misunderstanding last night. You startled my flock,” it explained, “and I thought you meant us harm. I apologize.”

Thea studied the wolf. At that moment, it felt more like an oversized dog than a fearsome predator. Tenuously, she extended her hand. The wolf cautiously approached, smelled her, and brushed its enormous head against her palm. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry too,” Thea answered, as the wolf walked back to its master.

Miiitra sat up, crossing its legs, and gave Thea its full attention. “You came to convince me of something?”

Thea bristled. “I’m not eloquent, and I’m not going to change that now, so I’ll keep it short: I can help you, if you’ll help me. I want to protect the forest and protect Sheffield.”

“What can you help me with? What would a... local god, or maybe a forest spirit, need from a little witch?” Miiitra intoned in what Thea took to be humor.

“Humans are poisoning the water in your woods. It comes from the factory they just built nearby. It’s killing prey animals, but it also poisons your flock. They’re more aggressive because they’re in pain,” she explained.

Miitra considered this. “Humans hurt us. We retaliate. We must hunt farther afield, kill their flock. If they harm humans, it would be justice, though that isn’t my goal- I just want to be left alone.”

“You’re not even punishing the right humans; the farmers have nothing to do with this.”

“Then you would like for me to point my anger in another direction?”

“No! That’s not what I mean. Humans are combative,” Thea explained, “and we’re stubborn. Probably why I’m back here after last night. If you attack, they’ll just keep coming. Rebuilding. You can’t convince them to stop like this.”

“How would you stop this?” the creature asked.

“We can outsmart them. Show them you’re on the same side, but you have to stop terrorizing the farmers.”

Miitra stood up. It was imposingly tall. Thea was still stunned at how odd it looked, with its goatish legs and wide antlers. It took a few calm, slow steps towards Thea.

“That result would be agreeable to me. What would you like?”

“I need you to give back the boy you’re keeping here.”

Miitra laughed, or at least, gave what Thea interpreted to be a laugh. It sounded like bleating, but from a whole family of goats. “He was lost in the woods, and I took him in. He is unharmed. I intended to return him, but I knew not where to.”

“I’ve met his mother. I can take him home.”

“He belongs there, and not here,” Miitra agreed. It seemed deep in thought. “Though if I give him to you...what is to make you keep your end of the bargain?”

Thea gulped. “Sheffield is my home, too. I don’t want to see it destroyed, any more than I want these woods to be destroyed. I’m the only one here that just wants everyone to be okay.”

Miitra considered this silently for a long while. Thea, nervous, fiddled with her hands. Finally, it spoke up.

“Very well. I will trust you- but do not fail me. My patience is thin.”

Thea exhaled, shoulders slumping.

“Do I write my name in your book with blood, do we shake on it?” Thea inquired, nervously. Miitra looked puzzled, and she added “I was raised on a lot of superstition.”

Miitra let out its strange, ululating laugh again. “Our word will be our bond. Tell me more of your plan, and I will send you on your way, little witch.”

The sun had set by the time Thea and Miitra finished their conversation. The thicket of trees seemed to part for her as she left, as it was nowhere near as dense as when she had entered. She held the sleeping boy to her chest. Lavinia and Prosper waited where she left them. Lavinia was petting a fox, Prosper was taking the scene with clear concern.

“Thea!” Lavinia exclaimed, rushing forward.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Thea assured her. “I’ve got him.”

“It took our deal?” Prosper asked, sounding less sure of herself than Thea had ever heard her.

“It did,” Thea nodded. “We close the factory, Sheffield is safe. Little man here isn’t going to remember anything when he wakes up. He’ll think he bumped his head.”

Prosper let out an exhausted sigh. “We can leave?”

Girding herself, Thea cradled the child and led the way out.

Leaving the woods was tricky, as it required tracing the steps in the old growth they’d trounced on their way in, but eventually it gave way to the more familiar woods. Childhood memories formed her compass through the gloom. Off to the right a half mile was where she’d pick blackberries in the late summer. Further on, a detour to the left would make its way to the pond she remembered learning to swim in.

The woods grew younger, thinner, and soon the girls spilled out into the flat farmlands once more. To the right was the Smith

farm. The barbed wire was new, but the rock retaining wall she'd helped the Smith boys build was still there, albeit it had seen better days. She led them around, then to the dirt path dividing the Smiths' fields and the Masseys'. She had a faint scar on her knee from falling on this path as a child and cutting it open on a sharp piece of shale. She'd been with...Alaura Candler at the time, playing. Her first kiss was also with Alaura Candler, years later, though Alaura was only open to it because she wanted to seem experienced for her new boyfriend, and Thea didn't *really* know how to kiss but she was eager to learn, and that was behind the farrier...no, that was behind the post office, Thea remembered, which they were just coming up on. The town was slumbering but for the chapel, whose windows were bright with lights and the shadows of penitents. Thea knew where to go.

Lavinia and Prosper, having snuffed their torches, got the double doors for her. The murmuring of prayers could be heard even before getting inside. The chapel was packed full, with most parishioners on their knees in front of the pews, though some clogged the aisles as well. Behind the lectern was Thea's father, arms outstretched, palms to the sky, invoking his Lord. He was the first, and maybe only, to look up and see her.

They made eye contact. Thea's already heavy breathing picked up. She realized she'd made a critical mistake. Her father's hands dropped to his sides, and he stood awestruck for a moment.

"It's a miracle," he began softly, "our child is returned to us."

Before the others could look up from their prayers, Thea sat the dozing child down in the nearest pew and ran.

Nine

“I must say I’m sorry for the other day,” Elijah began. He was looking down the range of his viewfinder, camera pressed tightly to his face. The morning sun was peeking through the trees and spreading shadow-dappled sunlight over the pool. The macabre scene had been beautifully arranged- dead fish were floating belly up in the water, courtesy of Miitra. The birds too were silent, casting an eerie calm over the forest. It was beguiling but not inherently dishonest- the water was unclean and becoming a bit more green than blue. The stench was still foul, and the witches had dipped handkerchiefs in perfume, then wrapped them around their faces in hopes they’d help. It just added a lemon twist to the pervasive scent of sulfur.

“It’s alright. I said some mean things too,” Thea answered.

“How did you find the place?” he continued, crouching down and getting another shot.

“This was a swimming hole we used as kids,” Prosper explained, a sly smile on her lips. “When the factory up north drilled wells, they must have connected to the same underground reservoir.”

“The dead animals were the first clue,” Lavinia picked up, as they had practiced, “I think they’d been drinking from it as well. We found a raccoon- well you saw, foaming at the mouth. We think it’s driving the predators to hunt further afield. Might even be making them rabid themselves.”

“If this continues-” Elijah reasoned, “it’ll poison the groundwater in Sheffield, too. Make the whole area inhospitable for crops or for people.”

“That’s my fear,” Thea added. “Do you think you can get the factory closed down, with all this?”

“The reformists have been fervent about cleaning up the city,” he answered, smiling. “Workers unions too. If it’s poisonous here, it’s got to be worse in the factory itself. I’ll get this on the front page. It might take a few days, but something’s going to change here, either the Board closes it, or the farmers do. It’s just like I was saying, really. No boogeymen, just human folly.”

Thea grinned. She’d thought her best bet was to convince Elijah of his own biases, but she didn’t expect it to be that easy. A feeling of being watched overtook her, and in her stomach, she felt something like a tug. She glanced around hesitantly, finding a single scrub jay overhead in a branch. It eyed Thea directly, and she understood- Miitra was keeping an eye on things. She gave it an approving smile, and it flew off.

“If you’re finished, might we walk back?” Thea gestured. She was unsure how long Miitra’s spell might last.

“Certainly ladies,” he answered. Thea could almost feel Prosper’s eyes roll. Thea was holding back a fit of relieved laughter as the group trounced through the underbrush and back out into the fields around Sheffield. It was another few minutes to the inn, with Elijah bringing up the rear, laden with his camera. He paused on the front steps before going in.

“Say, Miss Theodora. Thea, right? Can I call you Thea?”

Thea turned. The others were already out of earshot. “Sure.”

“I don’t know if you live in Wilhelmina, but once I get back,” he began, smiling, “well, would you like to meet up sometime? Have dinner? See a picture?”

Thea’s eyes grew wider than wagon wheels. “Are you asking to court me?”

“I’m asking to see where things go,” he replied.

Thea fought back a surge of emotions, many of them hostile, and took a deep breath. She walked up the steps to the porch and continued.

“You’re handsome, and you seem to do really well for yourself, and much as I didn’t want to admit it, your heart really is in the right place,” she explained.

“That sounds like a ‘no’,” Elijah quipped.

Thea gritted her teeth. “You know what you don’t do that women really like? You don’t really listen. You wait your turn to talk, then you keep monologuing. Work on that, and I’m sure you’ll find a wonderful gal. I’m spoken for.”

Elijah looked firmly taken aback by her comments. His smile falling, he looked down at his shoes, then back to Thea, face flushed. “Pardon me for assuming. I didn’t realize you were taken.”

Thea wanted to say, “I’m not taken, because I’m not property,” but she kept that one back from her lips in a surprising show of fortitude. With a sigh, she said truthfully “it’s complicated. If you ever want to try my tonic, it’s on the house the next time you come by.”

Elijah smiled. “Maybe I should, for a change. Safe travels, Thea.”

“Safe travels, Elijah,” she responded, and bounded down the steps after her girls.

The station was quiet that afternoon, and the girls waited on a bench for their train to roll in. One question burned in the forefront of Thea’s mind.

“Am I flirty?” Thea asked.

The others snickered.

“Not overly so,” Lavinia answered. “I mean, you’re flirty with me, but I don’t think you’re flirty overall.”

“Is this about that reporter? See, it’s different with men, they think everything is flirty,” Prosper added.

“Really?”

“Oh absolutely,” she emphasized. “They’re so entitled, they think your giving them the time of day is an invitation to ravage you.”

“You’re so vulgar,” Lavinia laughed. Thea blushed a grapefruit pink.

“It’s true!”

“I was just being nice to him, is all,” Thea exclaimed.

“Oh! You can’t just be nice with them,” Prosper smirked, “that’s the worst thing you can do. Did you ask him about his photographs?”

“I did, but-”

“Oh, that’s what did it,” Prosper concluded, “you showed interest in his special hobby. I’m surprised he wasn’t outside Hortencia’s house reading love poems last night.”

Lavinia was laughing so hard she was nearly in tears. Thea was incredulous.

“Are they so starved of affection they think that’s flirty?”

Prosper, chuckling, took Thea’s hand in her own. “I’m teasing. Seriously, it’s not your responsibility how others interpret you. Don’t let that stop you being friendly, and being yourself, just because some dreadful stiff wanted to take you to the pictures.”

“I won’t!” Thea exclaimed. “Social stuff is just so damn confusing. I can’t be thinking about how ‘nice’ is ‘too nice’, I don’t have the patience.”

Lavinia, recovered from her laughing fit, put her hand on Thea’s leg. “I think you’re splendid as is.”

Thea sheepishly replied, “thank you both.” She took a moment to appreciate the woman on either side of her. She cared for them, and they cared for her. Even in Sheffield, for all its familiarity, the cottage and the witches in it felt more like home to her than the fields and roads she’d spent her childhood in.

“Rickie.” A voice cut through the malaise of the station and shocked her to life. Her hair stood on end, and she knew she was caught. Looking over her shoulder, she saw her father, standing with his Scriptures held to his chest. He looked sad, and seeing him so hurt her in a way she wasn’t expecting it to.

She stood up. Lavinia and Prosper were slow to let go of her.

"It's okay," she said, looking at each of them in turn. "I can do this."

"I'm not letting you subject yourself to this," Prosper whispered.

"I'll be okay. I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm right here for you, okay?" Lavinia added.

Thea nodded once more, then looked up to her father. She felt that inescapable childhood feeling of being in trouble once more. She hadn't missed it. She took ten steps away from the bench, keeping a comfortable distance to her paramours and away from her father.

"Yeah, it's me," she said, just above a whisper.

Her father smiled for a moment, a toothy grin showing his yellow-stained teeth. "It feels like my prayers have been answered all at once. I felt the blessings of the Lord in a way I'd never experienced last night. The fields were safe, the Shelton boy was delivered safely to home, and...so were you. You look so different, if it weren't for your mother's eyes I don't think I'd have recognized you," he paused, "but I'd recognize those anywhere, I think."

Thea's stomach was tightened into a knot. She looked anywhere but his eyes. "Did you stop drinking? Did you stop getting *mean* when you do?"

He nodded. "The Lord has helped me through many things."

"That's good," she replied, lifelessly. Her chest felt hollow, like a porcelain doll.

"I was hoping you might come to stay. I think last night was a sign."

"A sign of what?" she asked, eyes flashing up to meet him at last.

"I have a hundred questions about where you've been, why you came back, and why you look so...different. I think a younger me might have been angry about all this. Not anymore though. I love you. I'm just glad the Lord has brought you back into my life,

Rickie,” he said. That name was pins and needles to her ears. “I want to encourage you in the Lord.”

Thea’s lips turned to a scowl, and she looked down at her feet again. “That’s always what it’s about, isn’t it?”

“Pardon me?”

“It’s always about being in *control*,” she said. “I was a little girl and you could always take it out on me. Now I’m all grown up, and I’m out of the house, so you’ve got to have power over someone else - so you started leading the sermons.”

“Rickie, I admit I made...some mistakes as your father. I’ve confessed, and I’ve been born anew. I have *always* loved you.”

“Stop. Stop saying that name,” she muttered.

He continued, nonetheless. “I worry about you. I worry about how you’re making it in the city. Who you’re associating with, the way you’re dressed. It’s no environment for a young lady. I worry for your everlasting soul.”

Thea, shaking, realized that things were slowing down again. She couldn’t hear the train anymore, and her father’s words came to her slowly, deliberate incisions pressing into her skin in search of a vein. She knew if she reached out there would be a door, or a portal, a trip away from this platform via the Skein. She relaxed her fist, which had been clenched so tightly that her nails left imprints in her palm. Today she would not take the escape route. Today she would not let herself become an echo of someone else’s wishes.

“Shut up!” Thea screamed, hanging on the words, letting her voice carry the last consonant until she felt satisfied. “Shut up. I’m glad your god has forgiven you, but I haven’t.”

“Rickie-”

“That’s not my fucking name!” she spat, “and I’m not finished, besides. I’m tired of being *told* how much you love me, when you only know how to *show* it with the back of your hand. You love what I *am* to you, but if it weren’t for the last name we share, you’d close your door on me without a second thought. Now you’re here because you think I need saving, and worse yet, you think you’re

the one to do it! Well, guess what? The only thing I ever needed saving from was narcissists like you!”

The station was quiet. The few other passersby were rubber-necking Thea’s tantrum. Her father stood speechless, mouth slightly agape. Thea felt hands on her back. She hadn’t noticed Lavinia and Prosper approaching, sheltering her on either side. The tears came then, profusely, and the sobbing soon after. She furiously wiped them away and tried to hold herself together. She heard the steam whistle, heralding the approach of her ticket home.

“I...” her father began softly, “I don’t know what has put so much hate into your heart, my child.”

Thea, choked up, couldn’t find the words to answer. She didn’t have to.

“She’s done talking to you,” Lavinia called, voice firm.

“You should go,” Prosper commanded venomously, “we’re not half as nice as she is.”

A gust of wind and the distinctive hissing of brakes let them know that their train had arrived. Lavinia took Thea’s hand and led her towards the platform.

“I’ll be praying for you!” her father finally called, as she boarded.

“Save your breath!” Lavinia spat back, just before the doors closed.

Epilogue

“That’s incredible,” Juliet beamed. “I should never have sent you into such danger. I’m so sorry.”

“We did okay for ourselves,” Lavinia downplayed it, smiling. The coven sat outside on the north face of a hill, under the stars, which were impressive despite the nearly full moon. Thea hungrily munched on a plate of cheese. She let Lavinia and Prosper relay much of their story, respectfully glossing over what happened at the station on the way home.

“Not to mention it being Thea’s hometown!” Juliet lamented. “That was foolish of me. If I’d have known-”

“Don’t worry about it,” she answered, through a mouthful of food. “I think I needed it. It gave me some good perspective.”

“You can always say no, I want you to know that,” Juliet apologized.

“I think she’s aware, Juliet,” Oliver added, in good humor. “There’s three very capable witches you’re speaking to.”

Juliet sighed and let herself relax. Thea felt safe around her, in an earnest way she hadn’t experienced before. If anything, she was sorry she worried Juliet so much.

“You should be sorry I didn’t get to go!” Alder complained. Fae laid on faer stomach at the crest of the hill. “I want to meet a guardian spirit.”

“It’s scarier in person,” Prosper admonished.

“It sounded quite friendly!”

“You know,” Thea juttet in, turning around to face Alder, “You kind of remind me of it.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re just both always...lounging,” Thea explained.
“You’re missing the horns, but you have a similar posture.”

“I’d look so dashing with horns,” Alder concluded, only half joking. Lavinia cracked up.

Finished with her food, Thea wiped her hands on a cloth and reached out to squeeze Lavinia’s thigh. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Alder giving her a knowing, approving smirk. She couldn’t help but smile back. To her left, she felt Prosper’s hand on her shoulder, then her neck, then her scalp. Lavished with gentle scratches, Thea felt like she could have *purred* with satisfaction.

“Are you feeling okay?” Lavinia asked, putting her hand over Thea’s and embracing it.

Thea nodded. “I’m not ready to go into what happened earlier, but-”

“You don’t have to be,” Prosper assured. “Family is hard.”

“It’s not that, exactly,” Thea continued. “This has felt more like a family to me than...than Sheffield ever did.”

Prosper gingerly pulled her down to the grass, and Lavinia came with. The three witches laid there, embracing, looking up at the stars.

“Some people are born with theirs; others have to find it. I’m glad you found yours,” Lavinia added.

“Yeah. I am too.” Thea responded. She closed her eyes and focused only on the love she felt in her heart. It was peaceful, it was safe, and wrapped in the arms of her partners, it was unending.



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