The Cunning Folk

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The Cunning Folk

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Fiction

by

Erin Wylie

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I’d like to thank both the students and the instructors of the Creative Writing Workshop for the enormous amount of encouragement and feedback that they have given me. A great deal of the progress I have made over the last three years was the result of their input, and that of the excellent staff of the UNO English Department. In particular, I’d like to thank my thesis director, Joanna Leake. She magnanimously critiqued various parts of this thesis almost every week for two months straight. I don’t know how I could have gotten through without her patience and insight. I’d also like to thank Dr. Shelby Richardson, whose Crafting the Witch course had an enormous impact on the direction of this thesis. Lastly, I thank my family for their unending love and support.
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Bad Luck

Once, there were two sisters born in a small, canopy-shaded village far down a great river. The first sister, Iara, had the misfortune of getting the birthing cord caught around her neck as she slipped into the world. She was saved, but the almost-death had stripped much from her. Half of her face remained slack, never able to frown or laugh or smile: a shadow of what it might have been. In the village, she was known as the bad luck child, and her parents were urged by their neighbors to be rid of her.

Something in that small, uneven face moved Iara’s parents to compassion or pity or love, though, and they kept her despite the dire warnings against harboring bad luck in the family. The villagers reluctantly accepted this decision, as they assumed that such a weak child would eventually die anyway.

Two years later, Iara’s mother gave birth to a second daughter, who came into the world as easily as a flower unfolding. Her name was Ayi, and the villagers thought of her as the good luck child, a gift from the gods to balance out the misfortune that was her sister.

Over the years, the villagers watched the sisters’ growth with some apprehension. When Iara failed to die tragically in childhood and gave every indication of becoming a permanent fixture in the village, some of the elders began to murmur amongst themselves. Such potent bad luck must certainly be catching. They advised the rest of the village to err on the side of safety and avoid Iara whenever possible.

Despite these whispers, Iara and Ayi were very close, and though Iara felt the sting of her estrangement from the rest of the village, she was never lonely when Ayi was with her. She thought of herself and Ayi as inseparable.
Until, of course, the day it became apparent that they weren’t.

* * *

Iara was in the garden, attacking a particularly stubborn weed with a hoe when Ayi found her. Bent to her task, she caught sight of Ayi in the corner of her eye and immediately looked up and gave her sister her full attention. Ayi’s shoulders were tense, and her hands were folded awkwardly in front of her. There was a hesitation in her posture that was so out of character that Iara reflexively started to brace herself for bad news.

“What’s the matter?” Iara asked. As always, her speech came out slightly mushed and garbled. Ayi never had trouble understanding her though.

“I have some news,” Ayi said. She must have seen the beginnings of alarm in Iara’s face, because she quickly added, “Good news.”

Iara braced herself on the hoe and studied her sister. Under the graceful, dotted lines of her womanhood tattoos, Ayi’s skin was flushed. Her brown eyes held a hectic energy that split the difference between excitement and nervousness.

“All right,” Iara said. “Tell me.”

Ayi took a deep breath, flashed her luminous smile, and said, “I’m getting married.”

Married. Iara blinked slowly and stared down into the dirt. Married. “To whom?” she asked.

“Mirembe.”
Ayi said his name as though it was a gift that she wanted but didn’t quite know how to accept. Iara pictured the tall, laughing boy who ran around with the local pack of young men, throwing jaguar calls at each other and racing canoes on the rapids downriver. It was very difficult to imagine Ayi married to this boy.

It shouldn’t have been. Ayi was seventeen and blooming, her body full, her round face open and pretty and balanced. Iara knew that Ayi often mingled with her peers in the village, when Iara was fishing or talking her solitary walks through the jungle. She hadn’t really begrudged Ayi’s time with those who shunned her; she knew that Ayi gave the bulk of her time and love to her sister, and Iara had never wanted to consume Ayi’s entire life. But she hadn’t thought it through, hadn’t foreseen the eventual result of Ayi’s inclusion in village life.

Married.

She became aware that she had been studying the clumps of dirt strewn across her bare foot for far too long. She summoned a smile from somewhere and looked up at Ayi’s now-clouded face.

“Congratulations, sister.”

Ayi was easily read, and now Iara watched as her sister considered Iara’s reaction, found it wanting, and then rejected confrontation in favor of dissolving into happiness. She surged forward and threw her arms around Iara, hoe and all.

“Isn’t it wonderful? Mirembe’s a darling, and the ceremony will be beautiful with all of the flowers already blooming. Will you stand beside me when I take my vows?”

The lines of Iara’s smile turned wry. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Ayi stepped back a little, her smile drooping.
“But I’ll be there with Mother and Father, and I’ll help you find the best flowers for the ceremony. I know a lot of good spots,” Iara said quickly. She didn’t want Ayi’s new in-laws making a fuss about the bad luck that she would bring to any ceremony, but she also didn’t want to deprive Ayi of her sister on her wedding day.

Which was the greater wrong? The thought sent a stab of resentment through her. Not towards Ayi, not really, more towards the fact that she had to consider these questions at all. Where would her presence cause more trouble than it was worth? What confrontations, what people, should she avoid to keep her luck from spreading?

To her mortification, she felt tears appear and drip down her cheeks. She swatted at them with her weaker right hand. Ayi brushed the hand away and wiped Iara’s tears with a clean strip of cloth from the reed pouch at her waist.

“Don’t worry,” she said, her tone as gentle as her hands. “You’ll see me every day. I’m not leaving.”

“Not even when your husband tells you to stop talking to me?” Iara asked. Her voice sounded dull and stupid. “Not even when he tells you that he doesn’t want my bad luck being spread to his home?”

Ayi hmphed in indignation. “Do you think I would marry someone who would demand something like that? I’ve already told him how things are going to be with you.”

Iara tried to decide if her sister sounded impossibly strong or impossibly naïve.

“Don’t worry,” Ayi repeated as she tucked the cloth back into her pouch. “I told him that my seeing you wouldn’t spread anything anywhere.” She gave Iara another smile, this one with a twist of mischief in it. “I’m far too lucky for that.”
The days rolled forward. News of the impending marriage spread, and soon the village took on a festive air. The day before the ceremony, Iara was walking back to the village with an armful of flowers. The wind carried the scent of roasting meat, and the river hummed gently beside her.

Among a myriad of colorful jungle flowers, there was a handful of tiny white blossoms tucked into her palm. They would be woven into her sister’s hair, transforming Ayi’s long, heavy locks into a facsimile of the night sky. In Iara’s opinion, it was one of the most beautiful decorations reserved for brides.

Pain plucked at Iara again, but it was already starting to deteriorate into a dull ache. It had been a sort of willful ignorance that had led to Iara being blindsided by Ayi’s announcement. It felt like a kind of cowardliness, really, to have pushed the possibility, even unconsciously, so far out of her mind.

The village came into sight ahead, crowded against the river, leaning away from the dense mass of the jungle. The thrum of excited, busy people merged with and nearly overrode the river sounds. Iara stopped for a second and focused on the sound of the water, letting it sink in. Then she shifted her load and continued on.

She walked into the village. Despite the noise, there were few people near the dock, and the closest houses stared emptily at her from atop their stilts. She turned from the wide main road into the smaller lane that led to her home, and she found the crowd. It seemed like nearly the entire village was there.
It was then that she realized that the voices she heard sounded more like the angry hum of bees than people preparing for a marriage ceremony.

Dropping the flowers in the road, Iara started shouldering through the crowd, desperately trying to reach the front door. People protested as she pushed them, but quickly moved away once they realized who she was, their hands flexed in a sign to turn aside evil spirits. Iara paid them no mind. She burst into the house, the floorboards letting out jagged creaks as she ran across the main area to the room she shared with Ayi.

Ayi lay on her pallet, illuminated by the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the window. Her hair was still wet from her bath that morning, and one hand lay open and relaxed beside her head, the newly painted bridal designs black and gleaming on her palm and fingers. She was breathing in the slow, steady rhythm of sleep.

Iara slowly lifted a hand to her forehead. “By the gods, Ayi,” she said.

Her sister didn’t stir.

Iara’s breath hitched. She slowly approached the pallet, scanning Ayi’s body for a sign of a wound. She saw none but noticed that her sister’s lips where slightly swollen and red, as though she had just seconds ago been passionately kissed.

“A kissing beetle.” The words came from behind her, murmured reluctantly. Iara turned to find the village healer, Cayfut, standing with her parents in the doorway of the room. Her parents looked worn, like rocks that had been long embedded in the river.

Cayfut was a man with bird-bright eyes and long, sinewy fingers. His gaze inspired a sensation like being pinned to a wall with sharpened stakes. He continued his explanation, though Iara had not responded. “The kissing beetle strikes when the victims sleep, biting them on the lips and secreting a venom that sends them into an unbreakable
sleep. One can keep a victim alive for some time by forcing food and drink through their lips, but eventually the sleep ends in death.”

For several long seconds there was silence, as his words sank into Iara’s mind like stones. Then Cayfut let out a gusty sigh and said, “She must have lain down for a short nap and been bitten. And on the day before her wedding too. How very unlucky.”

Iara’s mouth went dry. “I...I didn’t…” She swallowed.

Cayfut raised an eyebrow. “Mean to?”

“No!” she protested. “I didn’t do anything! I would never hurt Ayi, never!” She turned her eyes to her mother, silently begging for support.

“Iara has always loved Ayi best of all,” her mother said. Her voice, though weary, held the steadiness of mountains. She had had a great deal of practice defending Iara. “She would not try to harm her on purpose.”

“No doubt that is true,” said Cayfut. His tone, however, left plenty of room for doubt. He had long been one of the most ardent supporters of cleansing the village of Iara’s presence. “But was there never a stray thought, any little shred of longing that the happy event that was to happen tomorrow should be delayed or perhaps not occur at all? Jealousy among sisters is natural after all, even under normal circumstances. And in this particular case, there is much laid before one sister that is forever out of the other’s reach.”

Iara felt a swell of indignation at Cayfut’s insistence that she must be awash in jealousy. She wanted to tell Cayfut that he knew nothing about her and Ayi and should keep his opinions about “natural” jealousy to himself. Despite this, she couldn’t quite bring herself to say that she had wanted nothing more than for the wedding to happen.
The beginnings of horror were starting to leak into her mind. Had she done this? Had her bad luck found her lesser feelings and used them to ride out into the world?

The silence lengthened. Cayfut’s gaze was locked on Iara. He seemed to be waiting, perhaps for her to break down and tearfully confess to sending out wicked thoughts to summon poisonous beetles.

Finally, her father spoke. “What can be done?”

Cayfut looked away from Iara and turned to study her father. “Done?”

“For Ayi,” her father said. His fingers beat a tattoo against his thigh, perhaps using the rhythm to steady himself. “How can we cure her of the beetle’s poison?”

Cayfut shrugged. His eyes swept over Ayi’s sleeping form and focused on the window, where the light was now starting to die. “I am only a village healer, and the poison of a kissing beetle is a rare and profound disease. Perhaps the priests in Kutkumtl know something of use, but I doubt they would travel so far for one girl in a fishing village.”

“How long does Ayi have?” asked Iara’s mother.

“A few weeks, if you keep feeding her.”

Iara’s father ran a hand through his long grey hair and started counting under his breath. When he was finished, he nodded and said, “Kutkumtl is far, but not too far. I’ll go.”

Iara studied her father’s calm, weathered face and felt a slight lift in her spirits. He was not a man to fail in the face of turmoil. She rushed forward and hugged him, and her mother placed a hand on both of their shoulders.
Cayfut’s voice cut through the room again. “Perhaps it would be best if Iara went instead.”

They all turned to look at him. Her mother’s hand tightened on Iara’s shoulder.

“Why?” asked her father.

Iara felt his deep voice rumble through his chest.

“To remove the bad luck, of course,” Cayfut replied. “To have her stay here, when your younger daughter is in such a delicate condition, would be to invite disaster.”

Iara had long told herself that she had heard these sentiments so many times that they had lost the ability to hurt her. Still, she shook her head a little, letting her hair fall forward to cover the right side of her face, an old habit.

Her father grimaced but patted her shoulder reassuringly. “She can come with me then. We’ll make better time with two rowers anyway.”

Kutkumtl was several days away by boat, upstream on the great river. Iara had never travelled so far before.

“Ah, but your canoe is designed to hold only two at a time, isn’t it?” said Cayfut. “If you succeed in getting a healer to come, how would you transport them with two people already in the boat?” He gestured to Iara. “Asking to borrow someone else’s property when you intend to use it to bear someone with ill luck on the great river is, of course, out of the question.”

Iara felt like her mind had turned into a muddy riverbank, slipping and sliding under her as she tried to grasp her thoughts.
Cayfut locked eyes with her, and everything about him, from the doubt in the slump of his shoulders to the questioning quirk in his brow seemed to be challenging her to walk away.

The light from the window was almost gone now, and the room felt dank with evening humidity and shadows. Iara couldn’t quite bring herself to look at Ayi, now that darkness was approaching.

Anger coated in hot shame ran through her, and she spoke before another doubt could cross her mind. “I’ll do it.”

* * *

She left the next morning, in a canoe packed with food, a change of clothing, and little else. Rowing upstream would be arduous enough without adding any unneeded weight. From the large, river-bitten dock in front of the village, her parents waved goodbye. No one else joined them, though Iara thought she saw Cayfut’s lean form watching from a distant window frame.

The going was hard, but she managed to loosen her muscles and find a steady rhythm. Few were the occasions when Iara could find pleasure in her body, and now she felt a small thrill as her rowing settled into swift, strong strokes and weariness faded to a distant corner of her mind.

That instant of happiness brought guilt close on its heels. How could she feel even the slightest comfort when Ayi lay dying on her cot? Her sister, who was supposed to be getting married today.
Cayfut’s accusatory eyes rose up in her memory. Her shoulder blades itched, and she had to stop herself from looking behind her, as though he might be stalking her from the trees. He had seemed so certain that she must be at the root of Ayi’s downfall.

Her stroke slowed. Bad luck didn’t have to be wielded, like a weapon. Many stories said that it simply spread to any who came in contact with it, like a disease. That’s why the vast majority of the people she grew up with stayed as far away from her as possible.

Against this, her family claimed that all the talk about bad luck was just superstition. Her parents would sigh and say that the ostracizing of the disfigured hadn’t been nearly as prominent in their youth. Then a man who lost a foot in an accident with a scythe went mad and nearly burned down the entire village. This had occurred shortly before Iara’s birth. The village elders, including Cayfut, had claimed that the village was having a rash of bad luck, and Iara should be given back to the river to be on the safe side.

Her parents’ decision to disobey this edict would never have been tolerated if another major misfortune had befallen the village. But Iara’s bad luck had seemingly touched no one else. She could hear Ayi’s voice, reassuring her even when they were children, “You haven’t done anything bad, Iara. Look at me, I’m fine!”

Iara jerked her paddle to the right and steered her canoe to calmer water at the side of the river. She looked into the water and tried to find her reflection, but even here the water moved too quickly to catch her likeness. She wasn’t sure she wanted to see it anyway. Comparing herself to Ayi had never been a pleasant exercise, and she tried to do it as little as possible.
Iara’s eyes stung and she dashed tears away, irritated at her own self-pity. Then she heard a loud splash and her head jerked up.

Swaths of dawn pink surged up in the center of the river, fins and snouts and smooth skin flashing through the water. Dolphins, an entire pod of them, moving like a wavering sunrise just beneath the water. As soon as Iara registered the color, she tore her eyes away and studied the bottom of the boat. Gazing into the eyes of the river dolphin caused terrible dreams for more than a fortnight.

The splashing continued and Iara wondered how many of the creatures were passing through. Then a wild, silly desire struck her. These creatures were mythically, catastrophically unlucky. Her own situation was precarious. But she pictured Cayfut turning away from the river, from all of them, in disgust, and that decided her.

She looked up. Most of the dolphins had already passed her by, and their broad backs and powerful fins were all that were visible as they thundered down the river. But a few stragglers were just coming even with her boat. They coursed down the center of the river, several feet away from where she sat, becalmed, by the bank. As one of the creatures made its upstroke, she caught sight of a small, black eye nestled behind the long, pointed snout.

It seemed like such a small object to be the stuff of nightmares. It blinked at her as the dolphin dove past and merged with the mass of brethren hurtling downstream. She watched the creatures until they turned around a bend in the river and she lost sight of them.

That night, and all the nights of the rest of her journey, she slept soundly and without dreams.
Several days later, she reached the city. From afar, it looked like a great animal that had come to the river to drink. As she rowed nearer, the wharf materialized. Some docks looked like stacks of splinters bound together, while others were weathered but lovingly maintained. Almost all of them were busy. The fishermen had just come in with the morning’s catch, and the air was redolent with the smell of fish. As Iara watched, silver, black, and red bodies rained onto the docks and were dragged away with the heavy nets.

Not wanting to disturb the frenzy, Iara rowed over to a particularly rickety-looking dock that hosted no boat and tied up her canoe. She had dressed carefully upon rising, slipping into a fresh-dyed scarlet cloth and putting good bone studs in her ears and lower lip. She couldn’t do much with how she looked, but at least she didn’t have to appear poor.

Worried as she was about Ayi, Iara couldn’t help but gawk as she walked. The houses closest to the docks, standing on a forest of stilts and roofed in deftly woven river reeds, reminded her of home. When she entered a richer district, however, the road was lined with houses of sandstone from the far mountain quarries. The sandstone had a yellow hue to it that gave the houses a sort of smug, golden glow. They also boasted small gardens that scented the air with jasmine and orchids, which slowly replaced the dock smells of fish and fishermen.
Iara came to a crossroads and stopped. Both roads appeared to be major thoroughfares, and she wasn’t sure which went to the center of the city. She had never been in a place that needed two main roads before.

A man came out of the house adjacent to the crossroads, carrying a basket. Iara hailed him, thinking that he might give her directions. As the man turned, though, Iara hesitated. He was wearing a scarlet cloth similar to hers in design but with a richer sheen to the fabric. He also sported long, elegant lines across both cheekbones, and mother-of-pearl studs peppered the rims of his ears. Iara tilted her head and let a curtain of hair slide nearly to her nose. Then she walked toward him, dust coating her ankles with every step.

He looked up expectantly as she approached. His eyes flicked once to the slack side of her face but otherwise made no acknowledgment of her disfigurement. Braced as she was for disgust or even fear, his politeness defeated Iara for a moment, and she struggled to find her tongue.

The man, perhaps sensing her difficulty, saved her the trouble. “Are you looking for the temple of the god-touched?” he asked.

“God-touched?” Iara said. The term was unknown to her. She had always been under the impression that the gods hovered in the heavens or lurked in their favorite places on earth, without doing much touching of anyone.

“Like you,” the man said, gesturing to Iara’s face and smiling.

Iara swallowed. This conversation had become much more unsettling than she had hoped. “I’m looking for a healer,” she said. “My sister lies ill, and I must find her help.”

The man nodded sympathetically and gave Iara directions to the temple that housed the city’s healers. When he bade her goodbye and good luck, she noticed that one
of his front teeth had a small chip in it. For some reason, that made her feel better about
the whole encounter.

As Iara moved toward the center of the city, the buildings grew taller, and the
roads broadened. The road also filled with an ever-growing chaotic mob of people. There
were food vendors selling ground-cooked fish and fresh fruit, troupes of brightly-clad
girls with orchids plaited in their hair, temple dedications swathed in robes of blue, red, or
yellow. Messengers charged through the crowd at the quickest clip they could manage,
apparently very intent on their business. Everywhere, tradespersons leaned out the open
shutters and doorways of their shops, calling out their wares at the tops of their voices.
Some called out greetings and promises of bargains to Iara, but for the most part she went
completely unnoticed. Getting to the temple was like fighting against a current, but
eventually she found herself in front of a grandly proportioned building built in golden-
brown stone. It sported the twisted spire that marked all temples of Sinaa, god of healing
and transformation.

Inside the temple, a path lined with blue water lilies led to a large granite altar. A
sculpture behind the altar showed Sinaa removing his old tattered skin and slipping into a
fresh one. Next to the statue stood a woman dressed in the blue robes of Sinaa’s
priesthood. Several rows of tattoos adorned her face, dark lines that were heavy with the
weight of her rank and learning. Her expression was grave, but that actually seemed like
an encouraging sign to Iara. Surely a woman so shrouded in authority would have some
answers.

“What do you seek here?” asked the priestess.
Iara waited for the brief flick of the eyes that the man on the street had given her, but the priestess didn’t even give her appearance that much notice. She seemed to be carved out of stone and steadiness of purpose, and apparently a mere face was not going to challenge that façade.

Iara swallowed and told her story. The priestess’ expression didn’t change, but she still seemed to withdraw, as though seeking answers by turning inward. When Iara finished, the priestess closed her eyes for a few shivering seconds, opened them again, and shook her head.

Iara felt her insides start to squeeze into a cold, hard ball.

“The kissing beetle’s bite is indeed terrible,” the priestess said. “If you lived closer, or a dedicate of Sinaa had been on hand as soon as your sister was bitten, then something might have been done. But it has been too many days already, and by the time you reach your village again, your sister’s spirit will have one foot in the afterlife, if she has not yet fully departed.”

Iara eyed the blue flowers that lay on the polished floor. She tried to grasp that Ayi was dying, or dead, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Comprehension was still eluding her when the priestess spoke again.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” she said. “If you would like to say a prayer for your sister’s spirit, I can direct you to the shrine. However, I feel I should also ask if you have visited the temple of the god-touched.”

“I keep hearing that word ‘god-touched,’” said Iara. “What do you mean by it?”

“Like you,” said the priestess, touching the right side of her own face. “Don’t you know your lore, child?”
Iara flinched under the implied reproof.

The woman ignored her and continued. “When someone carries an affliction such as yours, it means that Sinaa touched you in the womb. He meant to mold you into another form, but the transformation was left half done, leaving you like this. Since Sinaa has touched you, you have a special affinity towards him and are guaranteed entrance to the branch of his worship known as the temple of the god-touched. There, you would tend the sick and send up your prayers to Sinaa. The prayers of the god-touched are especially important, as they reach his ears more readily than those of other petitioners.”

These words managed to penetrate Iara’s grief enough for her to feel a stab of confusion. Sinaa was worshiped in her village, but no one had ever mentioned the temple of the god-touched.

Her thoughts must have shown on her face, because the priestess frowned. “I see this doctrine has not reached whatever backwater you come from. That ought to be remedied. A place under the reign of great Kutkumtl should not be allowed to lounge in such ignorance.”

Reflexively, Iara wanted to say something in her village’s defense. Then she realized that there was really nothing to say.

She looked up and found the woman’s eyes on her again.

“There is a place for you here,” she said, “if you choose to stay.”

Iara saw herself swathed in blue, ornamented in thick, curving tattoos, walking the streets of this bustling city to offer prayers. Prayers that would be gratefully accepted.
A part of her wanted it, badly. This wasn’t a life she had ever pictured for herself, but suddenly she was filled with the conviction that she could do it. She could send long, eloquent prayers to gods and have them answered; she could live here, in this lovely city, far from the village and Cayfut and—

Her thoughts stumbled to a stop. The picture faded, and instead there was Ayi’s limp body in a room full of dying sunlight.

Iara swallowed hard. She had to remember that she was here for a reason. One reason. “Is there no one in this entire city who could help my sister?” she demanded.

The priestess studied her and hesitated. Iara pounced on that silence, desperate. “There is someone,” she said. “Who?”

The priestess’ mask finally broke as she pursed her lips in an infinitesimal grimace. “A woman who has an…establishment close to the docks. I cannot recommend that you go to her.”

Her obvious disapproval made Iara shrink back, her hair falling forward. She gave the priestess a quick bow and left the flower-strewn temple.

* * *

It wasn’t long before Iara wished that she had found the courage to ask the priestess for directions. She ended up scouring the wharf, asking several people where a woman who knew something about healing but wasn’t associated with the temple of Sinaa could be found. The response was altogether different from her first attempt at asking for directions. Many people gave her shifty looks and refused to answer. Finally, she found
her way to a sturdy little building of respectable gray stone wedged between two dockyards.

Iara went inside, casting glances about her. The interior had an unexpected richness to it. Covering the earth floor were heaps of jaguar pelts, both black and spotted. Cunning little shelves fashioned of river reeds held several innocuous-looking things, like bundles of herbs or a sheet of bronze to use as a looking glass. Looking past the bronze, Iara spotted a mantle made from the hide of a nestling crocodile. The garment was fastened around the shoulders with a jeweled clasp held in the little creature’s mouth, which attached to a hook in his tail. Iara gently touched the scales. They were soft and supple as baby’s skin. She quickly withdrew her hand and moved on.

Fascinated despite herself, Iara ventured over to a shelf that held a jar containing several dark oblong objects in liquid. She squinted at them, trying to guess what they were.

“Dolphin eyes,” said a woman’s voice behind her.

Iara stumbled back from the jar, horrified.

“No need to worry,” the woman continued. Her voice was low and more than a touch amused. “They lose the power to give nightmares when removed from the creatures. Instead they gain other qualities.”

Iara turned to look at the store’s owner. The priestess’ reaction had led Iara to expect that the woman would be marked in some way, that something would set her apart. Instead, the woman before her looked like a lovely, if slightly extravagant, young matron perhaps five years older than Iara, with a heart-shaped face and glossy hair that fell to her waist. She had no tattoos apart from the dotted womanhood marks across her
cheekbones but wore piercings in both nostrils, the curve of her lower lip, and the corners of her full mouth. The studs held garnets, so that all of her features were set with glistening red accents. She gave off a sense of ripeness, like a fruit about to fall from the tree.

The woman smiled at her. The smile was merry, sharp, and quite different from any Iara had seen before, especially directed at her. “What do you seek here?” she asked. “A charm? For a young man, perhaps?”

Iara’s cheeks burned. It probably would take a magical charm to make anyone look at her in that way, but she didn’t like that the woman had jumped to such a conclusion. “What I need,” she said, “is someone who can wake a sleeper. Can you do that?”

The woman cocked an eyebrow. “I’m listening.”

Quickly, Iara told the woman her tale, just as she had told the priestess. When she finished, the charm woman was silent, her brow furrowed in thought.

Finally, Iara broke the silence. “Can you help me…” She paused, waiting for a name.

The woman’s lips drew back into a lazy smile. “I am Llanquipan,” she said. “And I can solve your problem.”

* * * *

Llanquipan gathered a few belongings, including, Iara couldn’t help noticing, several herb bundles and mysterious glass bottles, and they set off in Iara’s boat within the hour.
Iara had wondered if the charm woman would need to see anyone on the way, to give
notice of her absence, but she merely locked up her shop and told Iara to lead on.

Now Iara studied the other woman as she lounged on the bow of the boat,
watching the jungle pass as Iara rowed. She seemed different somehow, out in the open,
the bright sunlight washing over her hair and dancing in the garnets on her face. Here,
away from the herb bundles and alligator mantles and dolphin eyes, she seemed like an
ordinary young woman, someone just a bit older than Iara herself.

“Tell me about your sister,” Llanquipan said. She turned to look at Iara, her eyes
squinting against the sun. She seemed to sense how much this twisted her expression, and
looked away again.

“Why?” Iara asked. She had thought about Ayi nearly constantly for the past
several days and suddenly felt exhausted by the idea of speaking of her.

“It helps to know what I’m working with,” Llanquipan said, not taking her eyes
off the jungle. A shadow from an overhanging tree brushed her face and was gone.

“Well,” Iara said. She paused. “She’s perfect, I suppose. Sweet-
natured and kind. Hardworking. Beautiful.” Her eyes felt tight, and her hands clenched the oar. “She’s my
best friend. She never left me, no matter what anyone thought or said.”

Llanquipan hummed in understanding, and it came out almost like a purr. “Brave
and beautiful and kind. The golden triumvirate of virtues. But I have always preferred
cleverness and devotion, as far as virtues go.”

Iara’s rowing slowed. “What do you mean?”

Llanquipan reached down and let her fingers trail into the river before answering.
“To be able to make a goal and follow through no matter how far it might take you from
home. To care about that goal before all things, in the face of scorn and disgust and hardship. To have the cleverness to find a different avenue when the most respectable priestess in the city tells you that all is lost. Are these qualities not just as admirable as the ones you give your sister, if not more so?"

Iara didn’t know how to respond, so instead she watched Llanquipan’s slender brown fingers comb through the water.

“Ayi is lucky to have a sister like you.”

“No she’s not.” The words burst out of her, like the insides of a rotten fruit. “If she had been someone else’s sister, she wouldn’t be ill in the first place.”

“Is that what they told you in your village?” asked Llanquipan.

Iara did not answer. The heat in the air felt heavier than it had before, and the jungle huddled in around them.

“They’re wrong, you know,” Llanquipan said. “You had nothing to do with what happened to Ayi. Anyone can have ill luck, especially when you live in a poorly equipped village in the middle of the gods-forsaken jungle. It’s not your fault.”

Iara’s hands tightened on her oars. She almost wanted to pinch herself to make sure that this wasn’t an illusion sent from her beleaguered mind. She had wanted to hear those words so badly.

She looked up and met Llanquipan’s black eyes, which seemed to almost glow, like coals.

“Ayi truly is lucky,” Llanquipan said. “Your devotion is lovely to behold.”

Lovely. That wasn’t a word Iara had ever heard in connection with herself. She felt a scarlet blush start to spread over her face.
Trying to cover her embarrassment, she looked down at Llanquipan’s feet, still coated in fine dust from the city streets. “I-I’m happy you see things that way. It’s different if you’re from Kutkumtl, I suppose. The priestess there didn’t seem to blame me either.”

“No,” said Llanquipan. She finally lifted her hand from the water, using it to shade her eyes from the sun. “They find other things to blame you for, in Kutkumtl.”

“What sorts of things?”

“Differences in thinking,” Llanquipan said. With her hand over her face, it looked like she was trying to spy something far in the distance. “Trying to escape the pens in which they place you. The role Kutkumtl chooses for people like you is less unpleasant than the one your village chose, I’ll grant you that. But rest assured, girl, if you accept the vows that Sinaa’s dedicates offer you will never again have control of your life. The ability to transform the boundaries of who you are will be beyond you.” She wrinkled her nose in delicate distaste. “And they call themselves dedicates of Sinaa.”

Iara’s shoulders slumped. She should have known, really. The beautiful city that had begun to creep into her daydreams was too good to be true. Just as everything good that came into Iara’s life seemed to be.

At least Llanquipan had told her the truth. At least she hadn’t hidden doubt behind angry eyes or secrets behind a stony face.

“Thank you for telling me,” Iara said.

She looked up to find Llanquipan’s black eyes on her, gentler than Iara had yet seen them. “You deserve to know,” she said.
The journey back to the village was much shorter when the river was working with Iara instead of against her. They arrived only three days later, at dusk.

The dock was deserted. It was the hour when everyone was at home, eating with their families. The lights from their fires swam in the distance as the two women drew up to the dock and disembarked, the dock creaking under their feet. Iara swallowed and led the way to her house.

A familiar figure filled the doorway. Iara could barely make out Cayfut’s features in the weak light, but his eyes still managed to show their habitual gleam.

“That is not a dedicate of Sinaa that you have with you, Iara,” he said.

“No,” said Iara, looking up at him. “But she said that she could help Ayi, so I brought her.”

“You brought a woman of unknown credentials and respectability,” said Cayfut in a clear, ringing voice. “A woman willing to come here, to a small backwater village, with you. Did it not occur to you that she might be up to mischief?”

People were starting to come out of their houses now, climbing down their ramps and steps to get a closer look at the stranger. Iara felt her head start to tilt, allowing her hair to slip forward. Llanquipan seemed to be paying no attention to the conversation, choosing instead to rifle through her bag. She drew out what looked like a small torch, but with no inflammatory material in the cup, and a small pouch. She took a pinch of some kind of powder out of the pouch, let it fall into the palm of her hand, and blew it gently into the cup of the torch. It flared instantly, bathing the entire gathering in light.
The villagers cried out in surprise, and a swell of murmurs instantly followed. Cayfut looked conflicted, as though he was trying to decide whether lighting a torch constituted a respectable use of magic or not.

Then Llanquipan started to speak, and her voice was like molten gold, radiating heat and shining confidence. “I assure you, master healer, that I come here to save Ayi’s life. Iara came to me after she was turned away from the temple healers, who are too cowardly to admit that there are other methods outside of the sacred texts to heal ills. I am bound by no such restrictions; the horrors of the kissing beetle are nothing beside the magic I wield.”

A change came over the crowd as they drank in her voice. They were quiet, awestruck. Llanquipan was a sight to behold; the flickering light seemed to change the lines of her face, and it transformed her from an unknown woman to something more akin to a goddess, radiating sincerity and power.

Llanquipan turned to Iara and gave her the full effect of her smile. “Now take me to your sister.”

Finally, Iara felt the cold fist in her gut start to ease. She had been waiting for something to go wrong, waiting for her bad luck to turn her mission to failure. Even when Llanquipan assured her that none of this was her fault, there was still the lingering belief that her mission would still meet with disaster. Now they were finally here, and Llanquipan was going to heal her sister. Iara had to push back tears as she led them past Cayfut, who still hadn’t summoned back his derision, and through the doorway.

A large fire had been kindled in the fire pit in the main room. The door to Ayi’s room was open to allow the light in, and Iara could see her mother illuminated at Ayi’s
bedside. She looked like the last several days had worn her right down to the nub. She was in a half-doze and startled at their footsteps. She seemed to have not heard the commotion outside.

“Iara!” she said, her eyes crinkling as she welcomed her eldest daughter. Then her eyes turned to Llanquipan. “And the healer?”

“Yes,” Iara reassured her. “She’s here to help Ayi.”

Any doubts that her mother might have had about the visitor were instantly swept away. Her eyes grew misty, and she quickly backed away from the bedside, allowing Llanquipan to see Ayi.

Ayi looked like death already stood beside her. While Iara had been away, her lips had gone from subtly flushed to a virulent red. The color looked ghastly on her otherwise wan face.

Iara closed her eyes for a second. When she opened them again, she tried to focus her attention elsewhere. Ayi’s hair was a soft black cloud on the pillow, and her hands were still painted for the marriage ceremony. Her sister was not lost yet.

She looked over at Llanquipan, who was also studying Ayi. The charm woman looked oddly pleased. She nodded to herself, opened her bag, and started sorting through her herbs and vials. When she looked up again, her face had settled into serious, yet reassuring lines.

She turned towards Iara’s mother. “I think it would be best if you waited outside,” she said. “This is a delicate magic, and I don’t want to disrupt it with too many presences.”

Iara’s mother nodded and looked at Iara.
“Should I leave as well?” Iara asked, starting to move towards the door.

Llanquipan waved her back. “No, I’ll need some assistance. You are the person here that I have known longest, so you are the best one for the job.”

Iara’s mother leaned over and squeezed Iara’s hand. “Do your best,” she said. “Your father is out walking, trying to clear his head. I’ll go find him and tell him what is happening. Come find us when you are finished.”

Iara nodded and squeezed her hand in turn. Her mother left.

“Shut the door, if you would,” said Llanquipan. She was now kneeling by the bedside, crumbling something dried and tilting it into one of her vials. “My torch will give more than enough light.”

Iara did so, and the room seemed to both brighten and darken at the same time as all the shadows crowded together, now dancing around the only source of light.

Llanquipan hummed, satisfied with her concoction. She tipped it into the torch, which flared and started to expel an earthy scent that reminded Iara of loam, moss, and beetles. Llanquipan turned to Iara and handed her the torch.

“Wave that over the bed while I chant,” she said. She knelt at the bedside. One hand rested lightly on Ayi’s lips and the other rubbed small circles over Ayi’s heart. She turned to Iara. “Ready?”

The fumes from the torch lay heavily in Iara’s nose, and she thought it might be making her light-headed. The room seemed to swim, and Llanquipan’s expression twisted into something between anticipation and lust. Ayi, meanwhile, now looked more like a corpse than a girl. Only the keenest observer would see the rise and fall of her chest.
“Ready,” Iara said. Slowly, she began to wave the torch over the bed, making the room distort itself even more. Llanquipan began to chant in a language that Iara didn’t know, mostly made up of long, undulating notes.

Iara watched Ayi avidly, ready to spot any sign of movement. A moment passed. Then another. Then another. Iara’s head throbbed, and she started to think that perhaps all of this was in vain, her journey, bringing back Llanquipan, everything. Perhaps the priestess was right, and there was nothing that could be done, nothing...

Then, finally, Ayi stirred.

“Ayi?” said Iara, cutting across Llanquipan’s chanting. “Ayi!”

Ayi opened her eyes, eyelashes fluttering. “Iara?”

“Yes, I’m here,” said Iara, her voice trembling with excitement. “Stay still. We’re making you better.”

“Really?” said Ayi. Her voice was so wispy and weak that Iara could barely hear it over the chanting. “Because I feel terrible.”

“It’s your illness,” Iara said. She glanced at Llanquipan for confirmation, but the woman was still involved in her chanting. Her brow was furrowed, and she looked at Ayi with some confusion, as though unsure how she could be awake and talking just yet.

“You’ll be fine,” Iara said, speaking again to Ayi. “Just fine.”

Ayi closed her eyes again, and once more the room descended into firelight and chanting. Iara watched her sister even more raptly now. She felt a thrill as she watched the red fade from her sister’s lips, replaced by their normal pinkish-brown shade. She waited for Ayi to stir again, certain that this time her sister would wake as her usual self.
Ayi did stir, but it was only to frown and turn her head away from the light. The shadows spun on her face, and slowly it began to change.

If Iara had not been watching so closely she wouldn’t have seen it. Ayi’s face was definitely changing. Becoming tighter, leaner, with small lines around the eyes and mouth.

“Stop,” Iara said.

Llanquipan paid her no heed.

“Stop!” she repeated, shaking the charm woman hard on the shoulder. “What are you doing? She’s better now.”

Llanquipan, unable to keep up her rhythm during the shaking, finally stopped and turned to face Iara, her mouth drawn back into a snarl.

Iara gasped and nearly dropped the torch. It wasn’t the charm woman’s expression that shocked her. The changes wrought by the ritual went much deeper than that.

She was older, for one thing. There were heavy lines around both eyes and mouth, with deep furrows carved into her forehead. But the greatest change was the burn. Shaped like a twisted root, it stretched from the corner of her right temple, missed her eye by a fraction, and wound all the way down to her chin. As Iara stared at it, the lines blurred and went in and out of focus. One instant Llanquipan was young and unblemished, and the next she was a woman of late middle age, bearing a large burn across her face.

“I need the rest of what I came for,” Llanquipan said, her voice rusty from strain and chanting. “Don’t worry, I won’t take it all—just ten years or so.”

“Ten years?” Iara said. “As in ten years of her life?”
“That’s right,” Llanquipan said.

Iara took several steps back, trembling in fear and outrage. Her fingers could barely keep hold of the torch.

“Now don’t be like that,” Llanquipan said. “What’s ten years, even ten years in the bloom of youth, compared to someone’s entire life?” She shrugged. “And we never discussed payment.”

Somewhere amidst her shock, Iara’s mind fumbled with this argument. A laugh burst out of her, a sharp, bitter sound. “I suppose we didn’t. Witches never do, in the stories.”

Llanquipan gave her a sardonic look. “Who are you to fling that word around? Can’t you see that you’re a witch to them too, even though you’ve never so much as touched the higher powers? Bad luck child, witch, it’s all the same to them. That’s all they see whenever they look you in the face.”

It was true, but somehow it hurt worse when Llanquipan said it, when the memory of her voice saying the word “lovely” was still fresh in Iara’s mind.

“Was it all a trick then?” Iara asked. She knew she sounded pitiful, but she couldn’t help herself. “It was all just to get to Ayi and steal her youth and beauty?”

“I wouldn’t call it stealing,” said Llanquipan. “I’m saving her life, aren’t I?”

A horrible idea occurred to Iara. “Taking part of her life isn’t a necessity for the healing is it? It’s just something you do?”

Llanquipan scowled at her, the torch’s light deepening the lines in her face. “It isn’t just something I do. I made this spell. I experimented until I found a way to take someone else’s years and braid them into my own soul. I transformed the beauty of others
into a face that suits me, a face that opens doors and wins trust.” She closed her eyes, and her beautiful mask emerged again, the smooth skin gleaming almost as much as the garnets in her jewelry. “I’ve done more than those fools who call themselves dedicates of Sinaa could ever dream of.”

Iara stared at her, fighting against the bile in her throat. At least Ayi didn’t have to lose those years in order to be healed. Iara just needed to think this through, stall for time, and she could salvage this disaster.

Bad luck, her doubts whispered to her. How are you going to salvage anything, bad luck child?

She shoved those thoughts aside. Ayi was on the cot, senseless but no longer dying. Almost there. “Was it really so bad at the temple?” Iara asked Llanquipan. “Did you truly hate it so much that you turned into a scavenger?”

Llanquipan wrinkled her nose at that description. Nonetheless, she answered. “Ugly is ugly, even when you are giving all you can,” she said. “Why should I accept a pittance in exchange for prayers when I could fix myself? When I could be a part of the world instead of cloistered off in a temple, allowed out in the open only when I could be of use to real people?”

“You call this lie being part of the world?” Iara asked.

“You found your way to my shop, did you?”

Iara didn’t know how to reply.

Llanquipan spoke again, and now her voice was quiet, compassionate. “I’ll give you a little for yourself if you like. Just a little youth and beauty to cover up your weaker
side. It’s not like your sister doesn’t have plenty. Didn’t you ever envy her at all, growing up? Why should she have everything while you have nothing?”

Nothing? Iara supposed that from Llanquipan’s point of view, with her shop and her mask and her powers, Iara did have nothing. Just Cayfut, and his accusatory eyes, and the villagers with their furtive glances. The other people her age made offhand gestures to cast out bad luck whenever she came near, while accepting Ayi with open arms. There would be no husband, no children for her in this life. And the offer of a place in Kutkumtl was false coin, at least according to Llanquipan.

Iara looked down at Ayi. A design resembling a dragonfly had been painted on her left thumb, one of the many symbols of change and renewal. In the flickering light, it almost looked alive.

A memory bloomed in Iara’s mind. Two little girls were chasing dragonflies on a wide river that wove through the jungle. The dragonflies skipped lightly across the water, while the two girls waded and splashed, their skirts billowing. Ayi didn’t stop laughing that entire afternoon.

The memory was a precious one, a safeguard. She couldn’t let Llanquipan poison it. And no matter what, she couldn’t let Llanquipan poison her against Ayi. The witch had worked her magic; now Iara must get her to leave without her prize.

Iara opened her eyes and pushed her hair out of her face. “You need to go now,” she said.

Llanquipan raised an eyebrow. “And if I won’t?”

Iara brandished the torch she still held. “Get away from my sister. Now.”
Llanquipan gave a loud, thrumming laugh. “My dear, you hardly dare to look someone in the eye. Put that down before you hurt yourself.” She turned back to Ayi. “This will take just a few more minutes. Are you quite sure about your answer? I’m offering you a chance that won’t come again.” Her voice softened around the edges. “Come on, Iara. You could be free of this place. And free of the person you were here too.”

If Iara was stunned by the first offer, she could hardly believe this one even as she heard it uttered. Revulsion thickened and churned in her stomach.

The charm woman had been studying her in the corner of her eye. She shrugged. “Suit yourself then,” she said and started chanting anew.

Ayi began to slowly curl up under the strain of the spell draining her life away.

Iara gave a wordless yell and swung the torch, clubbing Llanquipan with it and sending her sprawling away from Ayi. The charm woman screamed as her hair caught on fire. She rolled on the ground and looked frantically around for water, but there was none to be had.

Iara saw Ayi stir and look up. She caught sight of Llanquipan and started wrestling herself out of her blankets.

“Ayi!” Iara called.

Ayi looked over at her, wide-eyed. She looked haggard, panicked, and no more than her own age. She had never looked more beautiful.

Ayi scrambled over to Iara and grabbed her wrist. “Come on,” she said, casting a quick glance at Llanquipan. “Let’s get out of here.”
Iara shook herself out of her daze and followed as Ayi tugged her towards the door. A part of her hated to leave Llanquipan so helpless, but her instinct was to get Ayi as far from the woman as possible. Then she saw it, out of the corner of her eye. A cloud of dust, sparkling and deadly. It was the dust that had ignited the torch, flung out into the air. Llanquipan was trying to cut them off.

Ayi, heedless of the cloud and spurred by the fire and Llanquipan’s screams, surged forward.

Time seemed to stop. Iara watched as her sister threw herself into a trajectory that would change her forever. One that would perhaps make her just as much as an outcast as Iara. Perhaps, even, ensure that they would be together always.

Iara saw this possibility, this future, in a perfect, crystalline instant. And then she slammed herself into Ayi, who fell hard, toppling backwards. Iara fell as well, in the opposite direction. As she hit the floor, dust rained down on her and ignited.

Iara’s entire world became fire. Fire in her hair, in her clothes, on her skin. It hurt worse than she’d ever imagined anything could, and yet she felt herself pulling away from it, lifting her head, trying to catch one last glimpse of the world.

She could hear people screaming outside, including Cayfut, who was shouting, “Burn the witches!” She couldn’t help feeling that his sentiment was somewhat redundant at this point.

The last thing she saw was Ayi standing by the door, frozen. Screaming, with tears coursing down her cheeks, but alive and unharmed. Contentment curled around Iara like a cat around a branch. Whatever Cayfut or anyone else might think or say, here, finally, was proof that she had won.
“Run!” she called, or tried to call, feeling both irritated at and irrationally fond of her sister’s denseness. Then, as Ayi finally ran to the door, Iara whispered, “Good luck.”
The shop was busy today. Una gave a small sigh of contentment as she watched a woman in a starched white apron, probably a servant from the castle, examine a glass jar full of yarrow. Behind her, a man with gnarled hands browsed through the rheumatism remedies, and a younger woman with a sniffling toddler on her hip was debating between cowslip and elderberry syrup. Sunlight filtered through the windows, catching on the dozens of glass bottles that lined the walls. The bottles came in all shapes and sizes, and she had organized them based on use. They were set neatly on long shelves that stretched the length of the shop, all carefully labeled with the name and function of the remedy they held, just as her father had taught her.

The twinkling sound of the bell drew her eyes to the door as a man of about thirty years of age walked through the door. He was dressed richly in a green tunic trimmed with gold embroideries and had brown hair that became rust-colored where the sun hit it. The clothing indicated that he was a noble, though not one that she saw regularly. There was something familiar about him, but nothing she could place.

He looked at her and a sneer stole across his features. From her place behind the counter, Una straightened up and adopted a bland expression as she met his eyes.

“Excuse me,” he said, his tone borderline mocking. “I was told I could find a capable apothecary here. Would you mind going to fetch her?”

And nobles always bragged of their fair manners. “I am the apothecary, my lord,” Una said without inflection. “How may I help you?”
“Really!” His eyebrows shot up in exaggerated surprise. “And just think, all this time and no one ever told me that the local apothecary was also a foreigner witch. How could this be?”

The other customers had quieted when he came in. Now there was dead silence. All their faces were turned towards her, taking in, as if for the first time, her brown skin and the unruly curls that she kept out of her way with a headscarf. Her differences, so long blurred in their memories, were brought into sharp focus.

Una smiled, but she felt the strain in it. “Have you been in Killeney long, my lord?”

He frowned at being answered with a question. For a few seconds his expression flickered manically between amusement and anger. Finally he came down on the side of amusement, and his smile, if one could call it that, returned. “Killeney is my home, though not of late,” he said. “I am Lord Cormac, witch, back from the wars.”

She knew the name. Cormac was the lord of Killeney’s third son and had joined the royal army upon reaching manhood. He had left when she was about twelve or so and stayed away for more than a decade, with only a few intermittent visits home. She remembered seeing him once or twice from a distance. She knew nothing of him, except that he was an excellent soldier who was considered a credit to his family.

It turned out he was also an ass, as her grandmother would say. Una suppressed a quiver of fear in her belly. Her position in the town was not so secure that a noble spreading slander wouldn’t have serious repercussions. “I inherited this shop from my father,” she replied, speaking with as much conviction as she could muster. “I am an herbalist and an apothecary, not a witch.”
The words tasted like a lie, though they shouldn’t have. There was no harm in what she, and her father before her, did.

“Aren’t those things often one and the same?” Cormac asked. “Especially when the person in question has skin like yours.” He shifted his head, and his rusty hair gleamed like a helmet left in the rain. “After all, you’re a brown woman selling poisons. What did you expect people to think?”

Not all dark-skinned people were witches, and not all witches were dark-skinned, but this wasn’t the time to confront his ignorance. The other customers were trickling out the door, and Una wasn’t sure whether she was sad or relieved to see them go. She tried to dismiss them from her mind. This story would be all over town by tomorrow, and there was nothing she could do about it.

“I expect people to think that I’m an excellent apothecary with a respectable reputation,” she said. He didn’t stop smiling, and for a moment she thought of how satisfying it would be to do something to wipe that smirk off his face. She pinched her lips together and took a deep, cleansing breath.

No, she was not her grandmother and never would be.

“Now, my lord,” she said as soon as she knew her voice would be steady. “What can I help you with?”

The smirk vanished. Una felt a stab of pleasure until she noticed that the man’s derision had not disappeared. It seemed instead to be turned inward, and she watched with apprehension as his expression clouded over with a sort of inner pain that seldom boded well.
Not that she was particularly worried about Cormac, after an introduction like that. But nobles had a way of spreading their unhappiness around.

“Medicine for the heart,” he said finally, clenching his fist over the left side of his chest. “I need something to start my heart back up when it slows.” He grimaced, his mouth twisting around the words.

Ah, no wonder he was bitter. A weak heart in a young man was no trifling problem. He would not be healthy anytime soon, or perhaps ever.

Una reached under the counter and pulled out the small chest where she kept her more potent medicines. The top was carved with a pattern of twining snakes, an old memento from her father’s home country. One of Una’s earliest memories was of her father’s strong, dark fingers tracing the design. She could not bear to part with it, even though she felt her cheeks burn when she looked up and saw Cormac studying the carvings. Here in Eire, snakes were a symbol of evil. Quickly, she picked up a vial and poured a small amount of dried herb into a fine-woven scrap of linen. She put the chest away and twisted the linen closed.

Cormac looked down at the cloth. “Such a tiny remedy for a horrid disease. Are you certain this will work?”

Una chose to ignore the slight on her expertise and instead met his eyes in a firm and steady gaze. “This is foxglove, my lord,” she said. “It will speed up any lagging heart. Simply put a pinch a day, no more, in your morning tea. If you add too much, your heart will pump so fast that it will kill you. Is that clear?”

“As clear as your skin is muddy, witch,” he said, grabbing the linen off the table.
Una’s stomach lurched at the word. “I am no witch, my lord,” she said, trying to keep her tone calm and dignified. “I wish you would not spread that sort of thing around.”

In an instant, all of his mockery returned. His teeth glittered in the late afternoon light as he shoved the medicine in his pocket, threw some coins on the counter, and left.

* * *

When she got home that evening, her neighbor Old Seamus had just reached his own door, carrying a bundle of peat under his arm. At her approach, he turned and waved.

“Hello, Mistress Una,” he said, tipping his cap to her. “How are ye this fine evening?”

Una mustered a smile in reply. Seamus was one of the few townspeople who was friendly to her outside the shop. “I could be better actually. Lord Cormac came down from the castle this morning to give me insults along with his coin.”

“Ah yes, so I’ve heard,” said Seamus, cackling. “A witch, are ye now?”

Una’s smile dissolved. “Please don’t say that. You know it’s dangerous for that sort of thing to get around.”

“Everyone around here knows that there’s no harm in ye, Una,” Seamus said, but he nodded in agreement, belying his own words as he spoke them. “Some folks don’t have a lick of sense though. No use in giving them ideas.”

She bade him good night and entered her own house. It was a snug cottage with a thatched roof, a stone hearth, and solid, if not particularly fancy, furniture. There were
muslin curtains in the window and violets, her mother’s favorite flower, in a bowl on the table. Una placed some fresh peat in the fireplace and started a fire, ready to slump into the chair next to the hearth. When she turned around, though, she found it occupied by a ghost.

She sighed. “Granny, it’s been a long day, and I would like to sit in my chair without feeling like I’ve plunged into a pile of fog. Would you please move?”

The woman in the chair was as gnarled as a piece of wood and even as a ghost her skin retained a deep mahogany color. She scowled at her granddaughter. “Can’t an old woman sit in a chair beside the hearth without a youngster trying to oust her?”

Una rolled her eyes. “You’re a ghost, Granny. You don’t feel fatigue anymore. I, on the other hand, do. Now can I get my chair back before I keel over?”

Granny harrumphed her displeasure but finally relinquished the seat, seeping out through the wooden back the way mist parts around a tree. Una sat down and tilted her head back, soaking in the warmth of the fire.

Granny allowed her to enjoy the ambience for a moment, and then demanded, “So what are you going to do about the ass from the shop?”

“Absolutely nothing,” answered Una. She didn’t bother to open her eyes. “He’s a noble, and a noble with an unstable heart at that. You don’t do anything about such people.”

“Maybe you don’t,” said Granny. “I’d never let a jumped little prick like that treat me in such a way. You shouldn’t either.”

“I refuse to believe that there are no nobles in your country,” retorted Una.
“Of course there are nobles,” said Granny, shaking her head. Una could hear faint, ghostly echoes of the beads in her hair clicking. “But our nobles, they always knew their place. They ruled the people, but the witches ruled the land. Who else would make the crops grow and keep storms at bay? Who else could coax milk out of a dry mother, or undo curses wrought by vengeful folk? Our nobles knew a witch’s power and minded their manners. And if they didn’t, well, we sent them a little reminder.”

Una heard a hint of a leer in Granny’s voice as she finished her lecture, and opened her eyes. Granny was looking at her expectantly.

“I don’t do that sort of thing, Granny,” she said. “I’m an herbalist. I won’t be using any of my knowledge for killing.”

Granny pursed her lips. “I never said you had to kill him. How’s he supposed to learn if you kill him? Even I only did that in extreme cases.”

“Harm is harm, and I won’t have any of it.”

“Who taught you that it was all right to let folk walk all over you? I hope it wasn’t that son of mine.”

“You and Papa had different opinions on many things, Granny. And he didn’t teach me to let folk take advantage. He just kept the peace, for Mama’s sake.”

“I told Bakari not to run off with her,” said Granny. “Not that she wasn’t a dear, sweet girl, but her country has the most foolish notions about witches that I’ve ever heard. I knew it wouldn’t be a good place for descendants of mine.”

Una huffed a sigh. “I like it here, Granny. The earth is rich, and I can do a lot of good with the herbs that grow from it. And these are just ordinary folk, most of them. It’s not their fault their rulers hate witches.”
“It’s their fault that they listen to that nonsense,” said Granny. The gray cloudy material that made up her ghostly body darkened and whirled in vexation, giving her entire form a sense of motion even as she stood still.

Una shrugged. “They know nothing else. As long as I don’t do anything overt and foolish like, say, inflicting magical punishment on their lord’s son after he slandered me in public, then I won’t be in any danger.”

“Then why were you shushing the old man, just a few minutes back?” asked Granny. “Surely these good, fine people won’t listen to witch whispers?”

“I’m just being cautious,” Una insisted. She got up from the chair, stretched her shoulders, and walked over to the kitchen to start making supper. “I’ll just deal with Cormac the best I can and get on with my life. That’s all there is to it.”

“You shouldn’t have to put up with this,” Granny grumbled. “You should leave. Go somewhere where “witch” isn’t a shameful word.”

Una couldn’t deny that there was a kind of allure in that idea.

One of the violets on the table was wilting. She tapped it gently, feeding it a little strength. Under her touch, the petals became plump and fresh again, all signs of withering erased. What would she be able to do, if she became the sort of witch her grandmother had been?

Granny’s next words crumbled her thoughts like dried out peat. “Before you leave you ought to teach that boy a lesson. No self-respecting witch would ever let anyone speak to her so.”
“I am not a self-respecting witch,” Una told her. She picked up a potato and started slicing it, her movements smooth and brisk. “And if that’s what it means to be a witch, I’m glad of it. I’m happy just being an herb woman.”

Granny snorted but otherwise remained silent. After a while, Una felt her presence fade from the room, like a breeze that had gone silent.

* * *

For a couple of weeks, Una’s days were quiet. Customers came in and though she could see a hint of unease in their eyes when they looked at her, she didn’t care as long as they kept coming. Or at least, she worked hard to remind herself of that. Never had she wished more that she had her father’s deep, powerful voice or infectious laugh. He had always had a way of putting others at ease, something that allowed him to slip into this town and have them accept him, despite his obvious foreignness and suspiciously potent remedies.

The townspeople had never warmed to Una the way they had to him, for all that her mother was one of them. They never seemed able to place her, and she worried that one day their eyes would open and they would see only her skin and her way with herbs and decide that she was an outsider after all, a threat to be extinguished.

The fact that Cormac was pushing them towards this, with just a few careless words, made her blood simmer.

The next time he came to the shop, she was in the back room, boiling down a syrup to purge the stomach. She heard the bell and returned to the front to find him leaning his elbows on her counter.
“Mixing a brew? You look even more a witch than last time.” He offered her a hard-edged smile. “Should I be afraid?”

Una knew that her face was flushed and sweaty and her hair was escaping in unruly tendrils around her face. She couldn’t bring herself to tidy up in front of Cormac though. “Do you need more foxglove, Lord Cormac?” she asked.

“I do,” he said. “And make it double the previous supply. I’ve got a journey ahead of me, and I don’t want to be trying to find an herb woman on the road.”

“Are you leaving?” Una asked, trying to sound neutral.

Cormac’s face became sour enough to turn milk. “Not for long. It seems that the army has little use for an officer whose heart could stop in the heat of battle. I’ve been discharged. This trip is only a jaunt to collect taxes and survey our holdings.”

Una wasn’t sure how to respond. Was she supposed to express her condolences? She wasn’t even sure why he was telling her this. It wasn’t her place to comfort him, even if she had wanted to.

“Well, I’m sure his lordship and her ladyship are glad to see you make a life here,” she offered.

“Hah!” Cormac said, rounding on her like a wounded boar. “Yes, so glad to have a lackey and a dogsbody. So glad to have an invalid to invent tasks for. Make a life here? There is no life here, only tedium.”

He slammed his fist down on the table, the sun catching on his rusty hair as he glared at her. “You’re a witch, aren’t you? Can’t you read the future in the fumes from your cauldron or the lines on my hand?” He was yelling now, his words ricocheting off
the walls. Through the window, Una could see people staring as they passed. “Well then, tell me when I’m going to die, witch. Right now, that’s all I have to look forward to.”

Una said nothing. Slowly, she offered him the packet containing the foxglove. Cormac stared at her for a second, his breast heaving. He snatched the packet from her hand, threw coins on the counter, and stormed out.

* * *

The next day, Cormac left with a squad of guards to survey the countryside, and Una prayed that the oppressive air that she carried with her would clear in his absence. As she walked to her shop that morning, she noticed that some people would not meet her eye on the street. Shivering, she opened her shop and hoped for a quiet day.

Her wish was granted until just after noon, when a bedraggled young woman burst into the shop with a bundle under her arm.

“Please,” she cried, “please help the baby, she needs…” She thrust the bundle in Una’s direction.

Una took the bundle and unwrapped the blankets quickly. Inside was a pale-faced infant of only a few months old. Her breath was quick and shallow. Carefully, Una felt for a blockage, and sure enough there was a tiny lump in the child’s airway. Grabbing her smallest set of tweezers, she opened the baby’s mouth and worked them gently down the baby’s throat.

The child gasped and tried to cry, and the mother wailed but kept her hands clenched to her breast. Una peered down the baby’s throat, which was swollen and
constricted from the effort to force out whatever was blocking the airway. Gently, Una grasped the lump and started levering it out of the throat. All the while, the baby’s breathing grew weaker.

Finally, Una was able to get the blockage, an oat, out of the baby’s mouth. She was reaching for a remedy to ease the child’s breathing when the baby shuddered and went still. The young mother screamed and lunged for the child. Una cursed and shoved her away, placing her own mouth on the infant’s and attempting to coax her breath back.

She tried for several minutes, long after she knew it was no use. The baby was exhausted from her long struggle with the oat. Her breath was gone.

Una stood straightened and looked across the counter to the mother, the dead child between them.

“It was just for a moment,” whispered the young woman. She made no attempt to wipe the tears dripping off her chin. “I only left her for a moment.” She looked at Una pleadingly, her eyes fixed on the apothecary’s face, as though scanning it for blame. “She’s my first, you see, I didn’t realize…” She broke down completely now, pushing her words out through sobs. “How could I? It was only for a moment…and what will Liam say?”

Una drew one of the blankets over the baby’s still form and stepped out from behind the counter. She took the woman’s hand and squeezed it. “I’m terribly sorry,” she said, hoping her words reached the bereaved woman. Her chest ached from sorrow and her own exertions. “This isn’t your fault. It happens sometimes. It’s horrible and unfair, but this baby is at peace now, and you will have others who will grow up strong and healthy. You’ll see. You’ll never forget this one, but there will be others.”
The woman continued to cry, but her eyes started to focus, staring at Una’s hand in her own. Suddenly, she threw the hand away and snatched up the tiny, blanket-covered body. A hard, blazing sort of conviction came over her face, as though she had found something precious and she meant to hold it just as she now clutched the dead child to her breast.

“Witch!” she said. “You held my child, and she died. You were jealous that I had a child and you did not.”

Una felt the blood drain out of her cheeks. She held up a hand. “No,” she said.

The woman threw herself backwards, barreling towards the door. “Keep away from me, witch!” she yelled over her shoulder. “I will see justice done for my child.” The door slammed hard behind her, the bells clanging loudly.

Justice. Una stared down at the place where the body had lain.

Quickly, she locked up the shop and set off for home.

* * *

Una went straight to her garden, a large space in the back of the house filled with neat rows of plants and fenced in with a high stone wall seamed in lichen. Kneeling between two rows of fennel and coriander, she plunged her hands into the rich black earth. The ghost of the infant’s tiny, warm weight lingered on her palms, but now the cool soil washed them clean. Power tingled in her veins as she felt the gentle pulse of the plants around her, strengthening her just as she strengthened them for her cures.
She loved this place. She savored that feeling as her hands grasped the rich soil and her spirit reached for the familiar power of her garden’s herbs and vegetables. She could feel that same power in the small purple flowers that stubbornly poked their heads through the stone of the garden wall. She could feel it in the grasses that covered every spare inch of ground and cradled Eire’s iconic gray boulders. It was in the twining vines, the bristling hedges, all of the small secret places. For all the populace’s fear of witches, there was a deep mysticism here that Una could drink from until she was filled to the brim. It quenched her soul in a way that she didn’t believe any other place ever could.

Her father had felt it too, back when he first arrived in Eire with her mother. This was her country, and he had come because he was enchanted by her, a sweet, freckled girl who always had something new and strange to say. But he knew he would stay, he said, when he saw the land that she had sprung from. There were endless opportunities for magic here. New plants, new avenues, new veins of magic to explore. He used to say that he had asked the spirits of his country for a new life, and they had delivered beyond his wildest dreams.

She remembered an afternoon long ago, back when she was still a child. Her father was standing in the garden, tall and broad-shouldered, hair clipped close to his skull. His eyes were trained at a spot on the wall, and he seemed to be looking at something that was either very close or very far away.

A twig snapped under her foot. His head jerked, but then he looked over at her and smiled. “Una,” he said. “I was just thinking of you.” He gestured for her to come closer. When she did, he put an arm under her chin and buried his nose in her hair.
“I wonder sometimes,” he said, “if I made the right decision. Not for me, but for you.” He kissed the top of her head. “The land here is amazing. So potent, so vivid! It seemed like a playground that I had stumbled upon by accident, just waiting for someone to claim it. There are other witches here. I can feel them sometimes, off in the distance. But they stay hidden in their nooks and crannies, and I hardly gave them a thought.”

She felt a puff of breath against her hair as he sighed. “Now I know why. Peace here is so fragile. Press just a little too hard and you’ll break it.”

He squeezed her shoulders and turned her to face him. “The choice is made and done. I don’t want to abandon all we’ve built here.” He gently tapped the tip of her nose, just as he had done when she was very small. “We’ll just have to be careful. Promise me that you’ll be careful, Una?”

She had promised. She had kept her head down and used her power just for her herbs, her flowers, all the things that her father had cared about. But all his care did not keep him or her mother safe when a storm swept them out to sea two years ago.

She remembered, with a sharpness close to nausea, how utterly alone she had felt, after. Adrift. Her parents’ loss created an aching void that she could not even begin to know how to fill. It had almost been a relief when Granny’s ghost started to haunt her. At least then there was someone to talk to, even if it was a crotchety relative that she had never known in life.

As though Una’s thoughts had summoned her, Granny bloomed into being beside her. The old woman’s form looked oddly wavering and insubstantial in the direct afternoon light.
“Will you listen to me now?” she asked, hands on her hips. “This needs to be nipped at the bud, if you want to keep your place here.”

“I won’t use my power for violence, Granny,” said Una, matching her glare. “It will destroy what my family has built here, and Papa wouldn’t approve of it at all.”

Granny clicked her tongue in irritation. “It must have been your mother who taught him such foolish notions. I know I never did.”

“If you disapprove of Papa and me so much, why don’t you go and haunt your other grandchildren?” Una snapped. “You have some, don’t you?”

“Of course,” said Granny. “Twenty-seven at last count. But they are all at home, making brews, healing strife, and throwing curses at their enemies. They’re getting along just fine on their own. Yours was the spirit that cried out to me, just before I decided to go to my final rest. I didn’t want to leave you all alone.”

Una looked down at her knees. Irritating as Granny could be at times, Una was touched that the old woman had delayed her final rest for a grandchild whom she had never met.

“Now,” said Granny, brushing the moment aside with a brisk, sweeping hand. “I know you don’t want to send a curse on the arrogant prick, but there are other, subtler ways to go about this, you know. You need him to stop his scurrilous talk and take back his witch comments. Then everyone else in town should follow suit. You have that power, if you would only reach for it.”

Una chewed on her lip and studied the veiny leaves of the plant next to her left knee. They fluttered gently in the breeze, making the plant seem to tremble.
“All right,” she said finally. “I’ll listen. But only after I’ve spoken to Cormac myself and explained the problems in the town.”

Granny gave her a sour look. “The man’s going to be gone for a month. You really want the situation to stew for that long?”

“It’s only fair to see if he will undo the damage himself before we go about witching him,” Una insisted. “He’s melancholic after all. Maybe he doesn’t realize what he’s done and will want to set it right.”

“And maybe then he’ll pick you a posy and recite his apology on bended knee in the town square,” muttered Granny. “I’ve encountered far more bad apples than you, girl. You’ll see.”

* * *

The next month was the longest of Una’s life. Glances were cast her way and then instantly retracted when she looked back. People started speaking to her in low mumbles, or not at all. Her shop suffered greatly as customers slowed to a trickle. Una found herself eating day-old bread for the first time since the last crop failure, several years before.

Finally, two days into the fifth week of Cormac’s absence, her ears picked up the sound of trumpets, announcing the noble’s return. A sense of lightness swept over Una, and she smiled for the first time since the young woman’s visit. Surely she could set things right now. She simply had to explain.

The next morning she waited on tenterhooks, anticipating Cormac’s heavy step and clouded face. It took some time, but she was not disappointed. In late morning, he
came in like a thunderhead, hulking and stormy. Una thought that in any other situation, she would not have tried to engage a man who looked like that in conversation. But she could not bear the thought of waiting another week. She swallowed hard and spoke as he approached the counter, fiddling with the linen packet that she had already put together for him.

“Lord Cormac, I must speak with you about a matter.”

Cormac attempted to smirk at her, but he could not even muster the heart for that. It came out blunt and weak. “I am sick unto death of matters, witch. Give me my medicine and find another time to natter at me.”

“I cannot, Lord Cormac,” said Una, trying not to grit her teeth. “I will be ruined if this continues for much longer.”

Cormac’s head cocked a bit in interest. “Ruined? What misfortune could ail a witch? Can’t you twiddle your fingers and magic it away?”

“The problem lies in your joking, Lord Cormac,” said Una. She kept her voice soft and her eyes slightly lowered, focusing on his chin. “There are people in the town who believe that I am a witch in truth. One unfortunate woman has already blamed me for her child choking to death on an oat.”


Una’s hands clenched into fists, and she tried to keep her fear out of her voice. “Please, my lord, this is no joking matter. I could be driven out of Killeney; I could even be killed.”
“And what is that to me?” he asked. There was a new animation to his face now, a sort of sly glee. “Foxglove is a common sort of flower; I’m sure I could find another to prepare it for me. Why should I help you with this problem of yours?"

“Because you caused it!” said Una, pushed beyond her self-control. “Why should I suffer for your words? I have done nothing but help you!” She threw the packet of herbs down on the table.

“I don’t want your help,” Cormac shot back. He picked up the packet and squeezed it, crushing the herbs. “Even with your medicine, my heart flutters and wavers, as though it belongs to an old woman instead of a man in the prime of his life, a man who has fought in many a valiant battle.” All of his newfound energy seemed to drain out of him as he spoke, his words becoming slow and trudging. “My father pities me. My older brother sneers at me when my back is turned. My mother and sisters coo at me like silly little doves, as though sympathy will somehow make things better.” His eyes bored into hers, intense but also empty, like the spaces between stars in a night sky. “I have been dealt a terrible hand. Why should I stir myself to spare you from your fate when no one can do the same for me?”

Una swallowed hard, trying to sort out the mass of emotions his speech had inspired. His life was bleak, yes, and there was a part of her that cringed in sympathy. Another, more frantic, part told her to hurry up and answer his question.

“Because I’m innocent?” she suggested. Her voice sounded small and hesitant, even to her own ears.

Cormac shrugged, the sun catching his hair in one final flash of rust. “Good-bye, witch,” he said, turning away. “I suppose I will see you in hell.”
The cauldron bubbled in the garden, steam billowing out into the star-speckled sky. Una had debated with herself about the wisdom of performing the spell outdoors, where others might peer over the garden wall and see her, but she wanted to be close to the land for this ritual, drawing as much power from it as possible.

The fire warmed her, seeping through her clothes and deep into her bones. It seemed to have a thawing affect on her heart as well. The coldness that had gripped her in the shop melted away, and suddenly she was angry, enraged in a way that she had never felt before. How dare he? *How dare he?* This was her place, her home, and she was about to be driven away for no reason at all.

She would not let that happen. She would see the world set right. She would make Cormac set it right.

The fire seemed to sense the change in her and leapt up, licking the pot. The spring water inside hissed and spit in protest.

“Calm yourself,” said Granny. She stood beside the fire, her form almost indistinguishable from the billowing steam. “You’ll disrupt the working if you pour too much spite into it.”

“This isn’t spite,” Una said, scowling. “It’s righteous anger.”

“Well, whatever you call it, it’s souring the brew,” said Granny. “Control yourself.”
“I thought you wanted me to be angry,” said Una, stirring the pot and kicking a bit of dirt into the fire to smother the excess.

“I wanted you to be angry enough to do something,” said Granny. “Now that you’re finally taking steps to put that prick in his place, you need to act like a proper witch. Breathe, and focus on the ritual.”

Una approached the cauldron and took a small poppet out of her pocket. According to Granny, poppets were often used to send curses to the people they represented. Her father, ever one to experiment, had taken the basis of the ritual and used it to imbue an object with the ability to change its owner’s mood. Using this method, he could make poppets that were charms against anxiety.

Una almost wished she had such a charm with her right now. Her stomach twisted, thinking of how her father would react to seeing his ritual used in the way she and Granny had pieced together.

Pushing the thought aside, she scooped up a small handful of powdered foxglove. She plucked at the poppet’s seams and poured the powder into the doll’s rag interior. They would have to make do without a sample of hair or blood to tie the facsimile to Cormac, but she doubted that there was anyone in the vicinity whose veins were laced so thoroughly with foxglove. Just to be sure, she took at needle and put a couple of holes in the left side of the chest, to indicate Cormac’s weak heart. Examining her handiwork, she nodded to herself and threw the poppet into the cauldron. There was a plopping sound, and the doll disappeared under the water.

Now for the difficult part. Una breathed deeply for a moment, taking the steam into her lungs. Then she raised her arms to the sky and said, “Sky above and earth below,
I call upon you to enact a change on the man Cormac of Killeney. He has done me, your daughter, a great wrong and refuses to set it right. He wishes to flood the world with his misery, and I have been caught in the current. Help me to change the course of his mind, so that he may know the damage he does!”

She began to toss an array of plants into the cauldron, all the while chanting, “Fritillaria and hellebore for the persecution and scandal that hounds me. Hemlock from the shadowed glens for the death he might bring upon me. An anemone from the shallow sea for the illness on which he blame his troubles. Brambles from the wild wood, snarled and twisted as his mind. Dewberries and blackberry thorns to tear his thoughts asunder and wring from them remorse. Remorse! Remorse! This is what I call for above all else. By the sky above and the earth below, I abjure Cormac of Killeney to regret before everyone what he has done. Let him silence his hatred forever, so I may live without fear!”

With that last word, she plunged her power into the rich earth and drank deep. The power that usually only trickled through her veins, an intuitive connection to the natural world, now flooded her body. She gasped at the intensity of it, the sense of being one with the world and yet also its master. She waved a hand, and a breeze circled around her, weaving a playful stream of air that made the flames bound like gazelles toward the sky. Una shivered, and the earth shivered with her, a tremor rising up through the ground, but somehow she stood steady. At that moment, nothing could topple her.

“Careful!” she heard Granny cry. “If you make the earth jump around like a trout, you won’t much like the consequences in the morning.”
Una felt a twinge of irritation, but then her mind caught up with the old woman’s words. She released the spell, sending it up into the ether to find its mark. Her hold on the earth’s power loosened and eased back to the trickle that felt easy beneath her skin.

She stood there for a moment, breathing in the night air and adjusting to being herself again. She looked over at Granny, who grinned crookedly at her.

“Rulers of the land,” the old woman said. “Just as I told you.”

Una shivered. Now, finally, she could believe it.

* * *

Una was awakened the next morning by someone pounding on her door. She opened her eyes with no small effort and found that the sky was grey with the earliest rays of dawn. Her head throbbed, and her body felt heavy, as though she had been drinking. The pounding on the door continued unabated.

Una dragged herself up, pulled on a wrap, and opened the door, trying to get her thoughts together. Old Seamus stood on her doorstep, glancing around anxiously.

“Quickly, let me in,” he said, pushing inside and almost knocking her over.

Una considered telling him to come back at a decent hour with his manners, but Seamus looked so terrified that she just straightened her wrap and let it pass.

Letting someone push you around again already, hmm? Granny’s voice whispered in her mind.

Hush, she thought.
Seamus’ fear didn’t abate once he was inside. He wrung his hands and seemed to be trying to find his words.

Una wasn’t sure what to say to him. He had not spoken to her for a month.

Finally, Seamus just let the news burst out of him. “Lord Cormac was found in the town square this morning. They say his mouth was filled with one of your mixes. They think ye gave him poison, to get him to stop his talk. You should go.”

“Poison?” Una whispered, her face blanching.

“There was an earthquake last night,” Seamus continued. “Just a tremor, but you know we haven’t had one in years. And they know about Cormac’s misfortunes with his health. And they know you argued.”

Una’s mind was racing, images of the poppet and the cauldron snapping before her mind’s eye. “Remorse!” her memory recited. “Remorse!”

Then Seamus’ last two statements penetrated, and her head snapped up in indignation.

“His heart was weak long before he ever quarreled with me. And I told him to only take that medicine in small amounts!”

Seamus shrugged. “That won’t make a difference. He was acting queer, ye gave him something, and it killed him.” Hecocked his head, as though straining to hear the roar of an approaching mob. “I must go. I felt I had to warn ye. I know ye meant no harm. But I must go now. I can’t be here when the others come.”

“Others?” said Una. Her voice sounded dull. She was already exhausted.

“Yes, they’re coming soon, and it’s not to bid ye good morning,” said Seamus, heading for the door. “That’s why ye should go, now. You’ll have at least a half hour’s
head start.” He stopped at the door and bobbed his head in her direction, not meeting her eyes. “Good luck to ye, Mistress Una.” He left.

Una paused for only a moment before grabbing a sack from her stores and starting to stuff it with food.

There was a swirl of gray in her peripheral vision, and her grandmother materialized beside her.

“This is it then?” she asked. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes,” Una said, continuing to fill the bag.

“Good riddance,” Granny said. She started to shimmer with excitement, the light catching and bending around her in odd ways. “Are you going to leave your pursuers a gift before you go?”

Part of Una wanted to scoff at her. Another part thought that leaving a trap for people who wanted to kill her didn’t sound like a bad idea. Then her mind was filled with a dark, limp figure, crumpled in death, and tears started to drip down her cheeks.

“How could he have done that?” she demanded. “Was it me? Did the spell go awry?”

“Hmm,” said Granny. She was perched in the chair by the fire, her form shifting and molding itself to the wood rather than staying tamely on the seat. “Somewhat, I suppose. You asked for a declaration of remorse, and he gave the one that felt most appropriate to him.” She shook her head. “Trust that one to choose the most inconvenient method possible.”

“I drove a man to suicide,” Una said. She sat down, hard, on the wooden floor. “I drove a man to his death.”
“He was driving you to yours,” said Granny. “Guilt isn’t going to help anyone now.”

“If I hadn’t touched that power--”

“Hush,” said Granny, cutting her off with an abrupt gesture. “That has nothing to do with it. That’s a part of you.”

Una shook her head. “Maybe I should stay here. I committed a crime, after all. They should try me.”

“You think letting those fools kill you is going to fix anything?” said Granny.

“It’s justice.”

“It’s nonsense is what it is. They are going to take one look at you and decide that you deserve to die because of the way that you look and the way that you live. Do you really want to give these idiots that victory? Do you want to be a wicked witch for them to burn at the stake?”

Una was silent.

Granny put her hands on her hips. “If you really want to make up for having a hand in that fool’s death, then do something constructive. Do good deeds to balance out the bad. That’s what all decent witches do anyway.”

Decent witches, Una thought. Did she want to be a decent witch?

The memory of the power gripped her again, making her shiver with both longing and terror. She did want it. She really did.

Una turned her head, looking out the window into her little garden, the one she had faithfully sipped from all these years. It hurt so much, the thought of leaving it.
Not as much as the thought of staying though. *Be careful*, her father said, the words echoing through her memory.

*Sorry, Papa*, she thought. *Being careful wasn’t enough.*

It was never enough.
When Shebea enters the market in the mid-morning, the day seems determined to wear her down with its brightness. The various stalls are set up in a semi-circle that echoes the arrangement of the large, round bohios that house most of the village. The straw that makes up the walls and conical roofs of the dwellings buzzes gently with the insects that are currently finding refuge from the hot sun. The vendors of the market stalls, meanwhile, lounge under palm-leaf sunshades while the morning light glances off ripening fruit, freshly dyed cloth, and heavily engraved gold jewelry. There are some people strolling among the stalls, mostly Inaguans, with a scattering of people from neighboring islands. However, the only living creatures that seem to have any energy are a herd of children kicking a ball around at the far end of semicircle.

Shebea is looking to see if Irie and Vea are among these children when the ball, made from the condensed milk of the rubber plant, comes hurtling directly at her. Shebea swings her leg around and gives it a hearty kick, sending it back into the throng. Many of the children scatter like hens as the ball rebounds, but one doughty boy catches it with his foot and kicks it up to bounce off his chest.

“Good catch!” Shebea calls to him.

He gives her a smile that only flickers slightly when he sees who she is and returns to his game.

By now Shebea can see that Irie and Vea are not present and looks around for someone to question. She watches as the available adults quickly became busy with some task, or else fall into a deeper doze than is advisable for anyone running a stand. Finally,
she makes eye contact with an Elder who sits in the shade of a bohio, carving small figures from mahogany.

All Elders wear long, shapeless shifts and masks. Shebea knows that this one, Wood Elder, is a man, but visitors would not be able to tell until he spoke. As she approaches him, she studies his mask. Wood Elder’s mask is slightly different every time she sees him, slowly accumulating more and more carvings until the wood becomes so crowded that she can no longer tell where one carving ends and the next begins. Once the mask reaches this state, Wood Elder discards it in some arcane manner, emerging in the morning with a new, unmarked mask.

The mask he wears now is reaching the end of its cycle, its lines making up a landscape of deep valleys and sharp ridges. The design this time is fierce, its eyes and mouth upturned into a leer. Many might have found it hard to look at such a mask, but Shebea decided long ago that she has little to fear, especially on this sleepy island. She gives Wood Elder an amicable grin and asks if he has seen her children.

“I have not,” he says, his voice a warm and melodious contrast to the hard knife strokes he deals to the wood in his hands. “No doubt they are off gallivanting somewhere.”

Shebea rolls her eyes. “Well, I need them to help with the harvest this morning. I figured that they either forgot or ‘forgot.’” She grins. Well, they would hardly be her children if they were always biddable. “Either way, I’ll track them down.”

“If you planted in the communal fields, you would not be so dependent on the aid of little children during harvesting season,” Wood Elder says, his gaze on the sculpture forming in his hands.
Shebea shakes her head, brushing the old argument aside like a fly. “Irie and Vea are eight years old, plenty big enough to help their mother with a few chores. Besides, I know better than to go where I’m not wanted.”

“And yet you still insist on infringing on what is not rightfully yours.” Wood Elder tilts his head to look at her.

Shebea can’t see his eyes properly in the depths of the mask, making his gaze even more unsettling.

Not that it matters. She is unsettling too, just by existing, and they both knew it. “We have wildly different opinions on what is rightfully mine. You and the other Elders have known me since I was a girl, and you know that I have stolen nothing. You will simply have to live with the fact that not all of the magic on this island belongs to you.” Shebea straightens her spine and looks down on the seated man from her own considerable height. “You have no power over me.”

Wood Elder holds her gaze for a moment and then returns to his carving. At some point in the conversation, a fish had taken shape, strong and fat with spawn. “Don’t we?”

“No,” Shebea says, turning on her heel. The Elder seems to be determined to be unhelpful and vexing, and Irie and Vea are obviously not here. She leaves the man to his shade and wood.

*   *   *

65
There are several places to check, but the conversation with Wood Elder has brought to mind the river that flows next to the communal fields, bringing water for the women to draw from. The children may have decided to go and splash around in it.

This time of year, the yuccas are verdant and leafy, waiting for their roots to be dug up and harvested. Since it is market day, only a few women are out in the long rows. One has an infant slung on her back.

Shebea smiles, recalling the long days in the sun with one baby on her back and the other hanging in front. She had always appreciated her odd gifts, but she was never more thankful for them than when she had newborn twins to care for and an entire field to hoe by herself. Still, she remembers those days with fondness. Even when she was weary, she loved feeling the warm weight of the babies surrounding her as earth broke under her hoe.

She reaches the river and scans the banks, but they seem to be free of shrieking children. Instead several women are there, filling buckets to begin the laborious process of watering the yucca. Most are Shebea’s age, a few years into their fourth decade, or more. These women wear knee-length marriage skirts and expressions of careful neutrality. As Shebea watches them balance their heavy buckets on hips and shoulders, she remembers why she usually avoids this place.

There’s another girl with them, unmarried, who looks a couple years shy of her third decade. She keeps casting quick glances in Shebea’s direction, her eyes bright with curiosity.

Shebea’s lips twitch, and she gives the girl a nod before continuing to walk downstream. Perhaps change is on the horizon. The young ones seem to be
acknowledging her more than usual. Had they heard about her exploits and decided that they aren’t as scandalous and unnatural as the elders claimed? Or perhaps it’s because she is scandalous and unnatural that they are giving her attention. Either way, it amuses her.

She is about to give up and try another spot when the wind picks up and she catches the scent of guava in the air. Guavas are Vea’s favorite fruit, and she eats them as often as she can, much to her twin brother’s amusement. He often tells his sister that one day she will eat one fruit too many and turn into a monkey.

Shebea knows that guavas do not necessarily point to Vea, but she thinks that it is worth a look. “Vea!” she calls. “Irie!” The scent of guavas becomes stronger as she moves downriver, but the underbrush on the banks also becomes thicker and more tangled. Finally, Shebea huffs in impatience and jumps into the cold, churning river. The current is strong, but she is stronger. The scent is almost cloying now, and she is certain that around the next bend she will find her children.

She lets the river push her forward, and she rounds the bend, only to see an empty bank. Though the wind is still brisk, the smell has vanished as quickly as it came. The sudden reversal surprises her so much that she loses her footing, and the river, opportunistic as ever, pulls her under.

Another person might have been afraid in that moment. The water, calm and gentle-looking above, is swift and vicious below and tries to swing her about and dash her into rocks moored in the river bottom. But Shebea is like no other, and she twists herself smoothly into position, reaching her head up to sip from the air like a hummingbird sips from a flower. She catches sight of the bank and knows that she has already been pulled well past her starting point, and it will actually save time to let the
river sweep her to her next destination. Her decision made, she plunges her head back into the river, her arms and legs moving in strong, rhythmic strokes. The river relaxes its hold, as though realizing that it cannot harm her, and together they surge out to sea.

* * *

The beach is pale and deserted, like a bone left to dry in the sun. Shebea remembers playing here as a child, running with a pack of age-mates through the surf. She feels a small twinge in her heart, remembering the close press of bodies around her and the clamorous sound that they made, all howling and laughing together.

Movement catches Shebea’s eye, and she sees that the beach is not completely abandoned after all. A small figure crouches by a tidal pool, collecting shellfish. Shebea is somewhat surprised to see this, considering the pickings are much better on some of the other beaches. She approaches the figure, only to hesitate when she sees the white mask that the person wears.

Shell Elder beckons her forward impatiently. He wears a mask of shells bound together with twine. Unlike Wood Elder, his milky eyes are completely visible, framed with small, round cockleshells underneath and long, white spikes from conches across his brows. Overlapping clams and scallops cover the rest of his face, all bleached pure white. Shebea comes to stand beside him reluctantly.

“Two of you in one day?” she asks. “When did I become so popular?”

Shell Elder ignores the questions. Instead, he snatches a hermit crab from the pool and briskly breaks the shell on a rock. The shell shatters, and the crab’s body is collected.
Shebea watches, fascinated, wondering how he could move so surely with his obscured vision.

“There has been talk,” he says. His voice has a smooth, polished sound to it, like he was born for the elevated position he now occupies.

“So? I’ve never heard of a time when this place was silent,” Shebea says, trying to be flippant.

Shell Elder plucks another crab from the pool, this one’s legs still extended and treading air. “Visitors come and bring stories of your time abroad. They have always done this, but now the young ones gather to listen. They whisper that perhaps you were right to leave before you could be taken to the Elder’s caney.”

Shebea wrinkles her nose. The square building that houses the Elders is her least favorite place on the island. When she was young, she had nightmares about it. “I know you hate to admit this, but I would have been a terrible Elder. It’s too exalted and strenuous a position for someone like me.”

“You would have grown into it,” the Elder says.

“No, I wouldn’t have,” Shebea replies.

There is a tense silence. Shell Elder continues to submerge his hand in the water and pull out morsel after morsel. Finally, he shakes his head. “It’s years too late for that argument. But now you are back among us, and there is still time for you to give back what you should not have kept.”

There it is. Their real plan, behind all of their vague phrases. They want to drain her dry, adding her magic to the well that all the Elders take from. As if by refusing to be an Elder, she had voided any right to the power she had been born with.
Shebea snorts. “Why shouldn’t I keep it? With it, I am stronger and swifter than any woman alive. I can ask the waters to carry me, and they pay heed. The earth parts underneath my feet, and trees bend out of my path. Why would I just give it away? It’s kept me safe for all of my adult life.”

“It won’t for much longer. Keeping power meant for the Elders will only result in pain.”

“Thank you so much for your concern. Me and mine are doing just fine.” Shebea turns and walks away.

Shell Elder’s voice comes from behind her, smooth and almost winsome. “Where are your children then?”

Shebea freezes. The sand under her soles shifts, pulling the ground slowly out from under her feet. She is on the edge of turning around, demanding answers, when she catches sight of two figures out on a long sandy finger of land, about half a mile away. They are too far away to distinguish any features, but the figures are definitely children, and she swears that she recognizes the way Irie swings his arms when he runs, and Vea’s high, skipping step.

She takes off, Shell Elder dismissed from her mind. The sand sprays everywhere, and her feet have to try hard to find leverage. It’s hard going, but nothing could stop her before and nothing will stop her now. She pushes herself into the land and the land pushes back, hardening, giving her purchase, and her legs fly. Nonetheless, as she approaches her goal her vision wavers, sun and sweat making her eyes water. She swipes an arm across her face and looks up to find…nothing.
The figures are gone. Shebea stumbles to a halt and finds herself standing alone on the little peninsula, with only a view of the subdued, murmuring sea for her efforts.

* * *

Shebea is greatly disturbed by now, almost panicked. Shell Elder is long gone by the time she returns to that part of the beach, and she doubts that Wood Elder will be easy to find again either.

Or perhaps they are exactly where a person would expect to find them. For a moment, she considers going to the Elders’ caney and demanding answers. A shudder rolls through her. It pains Shebea to admit that her childhood fears of being dragged by masked figures into the caney still haunt her, but she hates, hates, hates the idea of going there. Especially when her spirit already feels so ravaged.

Nothing if not persistent, Shebea decides to check one last place. Soon she is walking along a patchy path through a dense forest on the leeward side of the island. She told the twins not to go there because she knows that the luxuriant green leaves shelter a fair number of poisonous wood spiders. They still go sometimes, she knows, when the urge to climb trees becomes too great. Whenever she catches them returning from such an escapade, she scolds them as she tends their scratches. But somehow smoothing on ointment turns into tickling, and they all end up dissolving into laughter.

She had been just such a child herself, much to the consternation of the elderly, doting aunt who raised her. Her parents died in a hurricane when she was very small, and
her earliest memories were of running around the island, getting into everywhere and everything.

It is hard for her to say when her power started emerging. Her strength and the way the land seemed to shape itself to her needs. Perhaps it had always been there and it was just she who changed. As she grew she became more daring, her feats of strength and speed so spectacular that soon the Elders started to pay her attention.

This was quite enjoyable at first. While the chief was technically the head of the village, the Elders were the source of lore, magic, and wisdom. By earning their favor, she became the darling of the entire village. Treats were handed to her free of charge at the marketplace, and she was given a space at the front of the crowd when the Elders told their stories and made shadows on the walls to bring the tales to life.

Sheba wrinkled her nose at the memory, as though she had caught a whiff of the rotten meat flower. She has never claimed to be the most perceptive of people, and she was well into her second decade before she realized that one day soon she would be escorted to the Elder’s caney, and when she emerged she would wear a shroud and a mask of her own.

Dreams haunted her for weeks afterward. She started to blanch whenever she caught sight of an Elder, and the smiles and treats people offered only made her feel nauseated. Finally, she decided to take to the sea, like a hero out of legend. She left late at night, stopping only to kiss her aunt goodbye and grab some provisions, a fishing spear, and a change of clothing before she stole a canoe and lit off into the waves.

Life at sea was glorious. Fish flocked to her spear, and the waves rocked her
to sleep each night. She didn’t have any particular destination in mind, so she let the sea take her where it would. She stumbled across many islands this way. Not all of the people she found were friendly, but she discovered that she could look after herself just fine. Sometimes she would trade for things by catching a great net full of fish all by herself, or clearing a field, or beating the island’s fastest man in a race. Some were awed and some disgusted by her, a woman who clearly had Elder’s magic but wore no mask and sheltered no village. The Elders she met did not approve, but they all seemed to come to the conclusion that she was not their problem to deal with. Friendly or not, she always moved on from these places eventually.

It was only after ten years of such travel that she found a man who she wanted as more than a friend. When she was just blooming into womanhood she worried that she might be dead below the waist, for she had little interest in what went on in the marriage bed, or out of it. Eventually, she simply decided that she didn’t care; life had plenty of other pleasures. Then Agwe came. He had a laugh like spring water, and he never pouted or sneered when her strength proved greater than his. He was a wanderer, just as she was, and when he promised never to ask for her hand she asked if they might spend the season together.

They did. When the summer was over they parted as amiably as they had joined.

Several months later, her body heavy with child, Shebea made the long journey back to her home island, thinking to give birth in her aunt’s home and find a suitable home for her child before heading back to her precious waters.

Upon arrival, she found that her aunt had died in the intervening years. The children she had grown up with were strangers now and wary of her. They gave her
shelter and helped her when her time came, but Elders murmured dire things behind their hands, certain that all her blasphemies would finally be punished and the birth would be long and harsh.

She could not have been smugger when she easily brought a lucky pair of boy-girl twins into the world. It had been ridiculous to let the Elders’ condescension worry her.

Once she was out of harm’s way and the twins were cradled in each arm, the world shifted again, and she found that she could not leave them. She decided to stay on Inagua until they were old enough to travel. She made a snug little bohio and a few neat fields, and told herself that she would leave it all behind once the twins were bigger. But a year became three years, and before she knew it, three became eight.

The air fills with the sound of ropes whistling, followed by a soft crack: the sound of a trap closing. Shebea looks over at a nearby stand of trees and sees a turquoise-feathered bird hanging by its neck from a bough. Beneath it sits a figure in a mask.

The sight of the mask fills Shebea’s heart with heavy dread. She is tempted to continue down the path, pretending that she didn’t see the person now freeing the dead bird from the snare. But that course of action would get her nowhere, and she hates being stalled even more than she hates being afraid. She stalks over to the Elder and sits down opposite her.

And it is a her. The mask before Shebea is a panorama of color, made of cloth and sewn with dozens of feathers. Blue, yellow, red, turquoise, and green are all featured prominently, which makes looking at Feathered Elder an almost a painful experience. The masked woman picks up her bird and starts to gently pluck away its feathers. A full bag lies open next to her, showing that she has been at the task for quite a while.
“Have you found your children yet, Shebea?” she asks. Her voice is low and has a breezy quality to it, like the gentle air that comes in the wake of a storm.

“I haven’t,” Shebea says, clenching her fists. “You know I haven’t.”

“If you were a proper part of the village, they would help you look after your little ones,” Feathered Elders says, her hands making quick, efficient work of the bird. “It’s always hard for a woman alone.”

“It wasn’t,” Shebea says. She can’t keep herself from clenching and unclenching her hands. A part of her wants to lunge at the other woman, while another part quails at the very idea. “I was doing fine, until you interfered.”

“And why should you be fine while others struggle?” Feathered Elder asks. “Why should you keep power for yourself when you could hand it over to the Elders, for the well, for the greater good of all?”

“It’s mine!” Shebea says. She’s treacherously close to tears, and that makes her even angrier. “You have no right to take it from me!”

“We have every right,” Feathered Elder replies. “You had your chance to become one of us. You squandered it. And now others see you flourishing and wonder if they must send their gifted young ones to be Elders when they come into adulthood. They wonder if others might journey across the sea, take exotic lovers, and bear children. Your selfish ways have jeopardized the entire village.”

“No,” Shebea says, jumping to her feet, unable to contain the hot, pulsing energy of her anger any longer. “They’ve only jeopardized you. You Elders hold this village, these islands even, in the palms of your hands. Now you are punishing me for slipping from your grasp. Well, it won’t work!” She swallows hard. “It won’t.”
Feathered Elder is quiet for a moment, finishing the task under her fingers. When she finally puts the bird aside, it rolls grotesquely onto its stomach, sad and naked in the dappled sunlight.

After she has placed the last of the feathers in the bag, Feathered Elder folds her hands neatly in her lap. It’s hard to see her eyes through the iridescent gleam of her mask, but everything in her posture speaks of pity.

“If you continue to think that way,” she says, “you will be doomed to spend your life chasing phantoms.”

A scream splits the air. It is Irie, and he is screaming “Mama.”

Shebea’s head jerks in the direction of the sound, her eyes wide. She turns back to Feathered Elder, ready to beat answers out of her if necessary, only to find that the woman has vanished. The bag of feathers is still slumped on the ground next to the spot the Elder had occupied, and the shrubbery around it looks completely undisturbed.

Another cry rings out, and this time it is Vea. “Mama! Mama!” Irie joins her, and their voices twine together and slam into Shebea like a physical force. She can take it no longer, and she runs after the sound.

The forest is thick. Branches swipe at her, and underbrush beats savagely at her legs as she charges through it. Wild rustlings come from everywhere as she disturbs every creature within a quarter mile radius. But she doesn’t care, can’t care. The voices are in her head, driving her, and finally the underbrush begins to yield before her, trees leaning out of her way and shrubs flattening themselves to the ground. She parts through the forest like a knife through butter. She gains speed, and as the landscape starts to tilt upward in a natural incline, she thinks that she sees bright, unfiltered sunlight ahead and
charges out into the open, her arms wide, as though expecting Irie and Vea to appear and leap into them.

In the next instant, she is flinging herself backwards, her arms fluttering like ripped sails. The cliff is inches from her right foot, a steep edge plunging straight into the sea. Overhead, seagulls are calling out to each other, and for a moment Shebea can almost believe that those were the cries she heard. Almost.

* * *

By the time Shebea reaches her home that night, only the last shreds of sunset still hang in the sky. She sits down in front of her bohio and watches the light slowly fade away.

The memory of the trapped feeling that had gripped her so long ago, when she learned that she would be an Elder, is vivid in her mind. A part of her argues for the same solution: a canoe and the wide-open sea. She feels a surge of longing for her old freedom, the wild happiness of being completely unfettered.

But she is no longer unfettered, and no matter how far she runs, there will always be two gaping wounds in her heart.

A clay pot is drying on the ground beside her. A fit of rage seizes her, and she throws it hard, as far as she can. Shebea being who she is, this is quite far. The pot soars away and only a distant crash on the far side of the field marks its demise. Shebea wishes that the Elders could be destroyed as easily, shattered to pieces until there truly is nothing more she needs to fear.
But for all of Shebea’s power, Elder magic remains mysterious to her. She doesn’t know where or how they are keeping Irie and Vea, or if they are capable of hurting the children from afar. She sits and broods on that thought for a long time, until her thoughts are hopelessly tangled and she finally lies down in her bed. Dark dreams are there to greet her, full of rotten fruit and bloody feathers, and seagulls that shriek at her with the voices of her children.

* * *

Shebea wakes up at dawn. Her head is clouded with bad sleep, and the need to make a decision is pounding inside her like a war drum. She looks around the room, at the two empty cots that lie next to hers. There must be a way to find them, somewhere, but these thoughts scatter, and she cannot catch them. She picks herself up, and one slow step at a time, she leaves.

It takes a remarkably short amount of time to reach the Elder’s caney, considering how assiduously she has avoided the place for the last eighteen years. It’s a modest, square building situated on a hill just a little ways outside the village. There is a wooden porch and a lovely sea view. The entire area reeks of incense, one of the primary tools of the Elders’ trade.

Shebea stops well back from the building, her feet refusing to carry her any farther. She knows this isn’t right. She will only be exchanging one type of emptiness for another.
What will happen to Irie and Vea if she leaves? In most cases, children without parents or relatives are raised by the entire community, passed from household to household based on who has a little extra. Not such a bad fate, as far as they go.

She would never know though. Her eyes hold tears again, and this time she lets them fall. She cannot bear the idea of leaving and not knowing what will happen to them. Nor, if she is honest with herself, can she bear the thought of never seeing them again. Any freedom she seeks without them will be false.

This is it then. If she cannot bear one option, she must learn to endure the other.

She walks to the door of the caney. The cotton flap is pushed aside, and Wood Elder, Shell Elder, and Feathered Elder come out. Wood Elder is wearing a new mask. This one has smooth round cheeks and a benign smile.

She nods to them. The movement is tight and jerky.

They all nod back, gracious in victory. They turn around and go back inside, and she follows them.
“I still don’t see why you have to marry her,” Elodie said. She kicked a rock that lay in her path, heedless of the polish on her walking shoes. “Our estate is running well, and we aren’t in dire financial straits. Or are we? Have you been covering up a secret gambling habit?”

Antoine sighed and adjusted Elodie’s hand where it rested on the crook of his elbow. She hated that their morning walks beside the lake were becoming more and more contentious, but she couldn’t help herself.

“Why is it so difficult for you to believe that I want to marry her, Elodie?” Antoine asked. “Sabina’s a lovely woman—generous, intelligent, refined. And if you can’t love her as a sister-in-law, surely you can at least appreciate all of this.” He gestured around them, to the expansive grounds, the large marble-clad manse that overlooked one end of the lake, and the lake itself, polished like a mirror except where the surface was disturbed by the motions of the pearl divers.

“She’s old,” Elodie said. She felt the need to keep mentioning this, as though bringing it up again would finally open her brother’s eyes to the travesty he was committing by marrying a woman twenty years his senior.

“She’s not old,” Antoine said. His tone clearly indicated that this horse had been well and truly beaten, but if his sister would like to do it again he was willing to indulge her. “A woman’s charms don’t instantly vanish after she turns forty. Sabina is no ingénue, but I like that about her. She knows what she wants, and she’s wily and determined enough to get it.”
Elodie scowled. It was true that Sabina’s business currently dominated the pearl industry. The lake was both the estate’s centerpiece and one of its major sources of income. It produced small, gray pearls that were bought by the ton to trim the clothes of wealthy ladies. But Sabina had taken it a step further; she also created manufactured pearls that could come in almost any size and color. Elodie had seen the Nursery, the place on the estate where this was accomplished, but she still thought of it as some sort of fell magic. Many things about Sabina, from her smooth, almost ageless features, to the distant, calculating look that could often be seen in her eyes, seemed to allude to something unnatural.

“I’ll never understand how you can love that conniving reptile,” she muttered.

Antoine sighed again, removing her hand from his arm and squeezing it gently before letting go. “If you brought me out here just to complain about my fiancé—again—then you will have to continue your walk by yourself.”

“No, wait,” Elodie said, clutching at his hand. “I’m sorry. I’ll stop.”

He looked at her with considerable exasperation. “First of all, I’m not sure if I can believe you at this point. Second, I really do have to go. The guests will start arriving in a few hours, and I need to get some work done before I have to greet them.”

Elodie deflated under his gaze, her eyes dropping to the tips of her shoes where they peeked out from under her skirts. Antoine had practically raised her after the early deaths of their parents. Now he was twenty-five and she fifteen, and though Elodie knew it was a foolish fancy, she felt like the gap between them yawned greater and greater with each passing year. She was standing still, and every time she looked for Antoine, he seemed farther away.
Right now he was literally walking away, bidding her farewell and heading back to the house. His grey jacket set off his broad shoulders and neat figure to a distinct advantage. There was no one more handsome than her brother, and now instead of finding a beautiful, friendly girl to be her sister, he was wasting himself on a rich, old woman.

A loud, rustling sound interrupted her thoughts, and she looked up at the trees, thinking to see a large flock of birds. But there was nothing of the kind. The leaves on the trees next to the path quivered and quaked from a sudden burst of wind. Then, just as suddenly as it came, the wind stopped. The leaves became still again.

Elodie stood frozen on the path, like a deer a second away from bolting. Then, just ahead of her, Sabina emerged out of the woods.

Like Elodie, the mistress of the estate wore a pale-colored morning dress. That, however, was where the similarities ended. Elodie was small-boned, with brown, feathery hair that she liked to wear in an elaborate knot on the back of her head. Sabina had a long, elegant frame and white hair that usually fell unbound to her waist. The color should have aged her even more than the forty-six years that she admitted to, but somehow it evoked moonlight rather than advanced years, and her face, though lined, seemed to defy anyone to put an age to it, looking one instant ancient and the next youthful.

Elodie supposed that she was beautiful. But not in the right way. She didn’t have ringlets, or dimples, or a silvery laugh. Elodie would never be able to gossip with her about the latest fashions from Paris, or attend balls with her, or do any of the other things that well-bred young women could do together. Soon she would be all alone, while her
brother married a decrepit bride and became lost in the dusty world of records and business deals.

A thought struck her. What if Sabina was using fell arts to seduce her brother? What if she was a sorceress, and Elodie had just witnessed a display of her foul magic? Granted, she hadn’t actually seen any magic, but how else could such an unnatural wind be explained?

Her breath caught in excitement. If there was a spell, there was a way to free her brother.

Sabina looked back up the path, as though overhearing Elodie’s churning thoughts. Her deep black eyes were like wells, and Elodie always felt like she was drowning when she looked into them. Sabina never acknowledged this reaction or any other kind of emotional upset. Now she gave Elodie a grave nod and continued on her way, as though she had simply been strolling by the lake.

Elodie waited until she was out of sight and then dove down a different branch in the path, walking briskly towards the house.

*   *   *

Elodie felt that if she was going to be searching for fell magic, she might as well check the most suspicious place in the house first.

The Nursery was a white, marbled room dotted with dozens of pools. Some of these were large enough for Elodie to swim in, while others could have served as birdbaths. Fresh water ran in glittering streams down the walls into a small canal that
curled around the room, feeding the pools. Within the water, resting in beds of silt, lay oysters.

Inside these oysters grew the most prized pearls, the ones Sabina crafted herself. She tinkered with the sunlight in the room and the minerals in the pools through some obscure practice, making pearls of all different forms and colors. As a result, each pool contained a different type of pearl: tiny and rice-shaped, round and plump as peas, cream-colored raindrops, pink globes that somehow gave off the airiness of bubbles, and many others.

Antoine had explained the process to Elodie before, but it was hard to think with the relentless sound of water splashing against marble in her ears, and the pools with their many creatures stretching out before her eyes. It was a brooding sort of place, and Elodie had to stifle the urge to examine every shadow.

Instead, she tried to examine the room as she hadn’t before, trying to find some kind of oddity that could only be explained through sorcery. But the chamber remained both as magical and prosaic as ever. Jewels grew in this place, and yet the waters that cradled them came from pipes, and their nurturers were mere animals, and not particularly mystical ones at that.

Elodie did notice that the pools and canals were laid out in a sort of pattern, something complex and spiraling but also balanced. All of the streams seemed to end up in a small pool in the center, which was only a few feet across. Elodie stood on her toes, trying to get a glimpse at the bottom, but it was too deep to see from across the room. She walked around the edge of a pool the size of a bathtub, intending to move closer to the center, when she spotted a dab of purple paint at the edge of the pool. It was a lavender
dot the size of a small coin. Curious, she crouched down beside the bathtub-sized pool and grabbed an oyster and her silk fan from her pocket. Using the metal edge of the fan, she pried the creature open and looked inside.

Nestled in its mouth was a luminous pearl that was gray, yet also lavender, like the sky right on the edge of nighttime. It wasn’t quite the size of the painted dot next to the pool, but Elodie’s fingers twitched, and before she knew it the pearl was plucked from its resting place and lying in the palm of her hand.

Guilt started to set in immediately, and Elodie almost tried to put the pearl back, as though it were a ring she had taken from a box. But there were so many, and this was only one, very small, treasure. It was already in her hand, and now it was in her pocket, the oyster closed and carefully deposited back into the silt. Elodie stood up and returned her attention to the center of the room, carefully skirting the other pools. Then she felt a distinct tug in her pocket.

Her hand immediately plunged into her skirt, grabbing for the pearl. There was a ripping sound, and before she could grasp it she felt the pearl drop. It hit the marble with a delicate ringing sound. Wide-eyed, Elodie watched as the pearl emerged from under her skirts, rolling unerringly across the floor until it came to the pool where it had originated. It went over the lip, falling into the water with a small plop.

“It wasn’t ready yet.”

The cool voice emerged from behind Elodie, and she spun around in a whirl of skirts.

Sabina stood at the door. Her eyes flicked once to Elodie and then rested on the pool that the pearl had returned to. “I hate to part with them even when they are ready,”
she said. “I’m afraid I must insist on keeping them when they are still immature.” She looked at Elodie again, her expression blank and severe. “I will give you an entire necklace of them if you like, after the wedding.”

Elodie flushed, the mention of the wedding only adding to the anguish of her embarrassment. “There’s no need. It was just a passing fancy, that’s all.”

Sabina nodded, accepting the explanation without quibble. “Very well. But I must ask you not to come here again. This space is sacred to me, and I cannot abide having it tampered with. Should you desire a pearl of any kind, you need only to ask.”

Elodie nodded, her lips pinched down into a thin line. She lifted her head and walked quickly to the door, skirting her brother’s fiancé just as carefully as she did the pools that stood in her path.

* * *

It was high summer, and the house’s gardens were lush with color, all of the flowers and sculpted trees lovingly tended by the estate’s gardeners. Usually this was the one area of the estate that Elodie enjoyed, but now the beauty was lost on her as she entered, trembling with rage. How dare that woman offer her pearls as though they were a treat to assuage a spoiled child? What nerve she had, to rub her wealth in Elodie’s face when she had just witnessed a blatant display of sorcery!

She glanced around the rows of the garden, quickly spotting her brother and several resplendently dressed gentlemen next to the greenhouse that held the garden’s
ferns. She strode over to them, quickly changing her expression to one appropriately grim.

Antoine caught sight of her as she approached. “Hello, Elodie. Is there something you need?” he asked.

He didn’t sound entirely enthusiastic, and Elodie felt another prickle of hurt. No matter though. She knew she would be able to set things right, if she could just get him to listen.

“Brother,” she said, speaking in her most formal voice. “I just witnessed something incredibly distressing, and I beg the favor of discussing it with you in private.”

Antoine’s brows went up. He glanced at the gentlemen with him, who were looking on with great interest.

“Go on, Monsieur Beauchamp,” one of them said, a dark-skinned man wearing a uniform with a general’s insignia. “If the child speaks so seriously, certainly you must find out what is the matter.”

“Of course, General,” said Antoine, giving him a small bow. “Gentlemen, I will return in a moment.” He led Elodie to the other side of the greenhouse to screen them from view. They stopped beside a row of roses so red they looked painted.

“What is it, Elodie?” Antoine asked, impatient. “Those are Sabina’s business partners, and you know I need to make a good impression. Can’t whatever it is wait until tomorrow?”

Elodie’s lips quivered. “I’m afraid not, dear brother,” she said. “I saw your bride-to-be practicing sorcery, and I knew that I could not keep silent.”
All traces of annoyance disappeared from Antoine’s face, replaced by a shuttered expression. “What did you see?”

Elodie smiled, delighted to finally have his full attention, and dropped her formal tone. “Well, the first thing I noticed was the great rustling sound that came out of the wood. There was a wind, but not a normal wind, mind you, one that only hit the trees just ahead of me on the path. And then the wind stopped, and Sabina came out of the woods!”

Antoine’s face relaxed and he folded his arms across his chest. “Elodie, I don’t think…”

“That’s not all!” she said. “The most suspicious thing of all was the pearl. It pulled itself out of my pocket, Antoine. It tore a hole right through my skirt and rolled back to the pool I got it from.” She pulled the pocket inside out and showed him the hole as evidence.

“Wait,” Antoine said. “You were filching pearls from the Nursery?”

Elodie flinched. “Not really, and that’s not the point. How do you explain the pearl acting on its own accord? It has to be sorcery!”

“Or it could just be a hole in your pocket,” Antoine said, scowling. “I can’t believe that you tried to steal a pearl. We’re guests here, Elodie. I realize that you have reservations, but you are not the one marrying her. I am. And I must insist that you treat Sabina and her possessions with respect while we are staying in her home.”

“But the wind, and the pearl…”

“Are not in the least bit consequential,” Antoine said. “I don’t know how to say this any clearer, little sister. I’m getting married, no matter what fuss you make.” He
squeezed her shoulder, none too gently. “The engagement party is tonight. I would appreciate it if you promised to conduct yourself politely around Sabina and our guests.”

   Elodie bit her lip, fighting back tears.

   Antoine sighed. “I’ll see to it that you get an entire set of any pearls you wish if you would just behave until the wedding is over.”

   There it was again. Offering her pearls as a reward for sitting quietly and biting her tongue while her brother married a foul sorceress. Elodie turned her back, gazing into a nearby rose’s garish petals in an attempt to stop herself from crying. She felt Antoine hesitate behind her and then walk away.

   A few tears slipped down her cheeks.

   “Handkerchief?”

   Elodie looked up at the white-bearded man who now stood on the other side of the rose bush, extending a handkerchief embroidered with the letters MP. He wore a blue coat and canary yellow waistcoat that clashed magnificently with the roses in front of him.

   “Thank you,” she said, taking the handkerchief and carefully wiping her eyes.

   “It’s no trouble,” he said, waving his hand. “I apologize for the rudeness, but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation. Do you truly harbor grave suspicions about Mademoiselle Demore? Or would it be premature to call her Madame Beauchamp?”

   “I do,” Elodie said, clutching the handkerchief. “And it is premature to give her that title, because I mean to stop this wedding. My brother is obviously under a foul spell.” There was no other reason he would treat her so. Her Antoine would never have
dismissed her like a flighty servant and left her to cry in a garden. Sabina had to be at the root of this, somehow.

“I see,” said the man. “You may call me Monsieur Pelletier. As one of Mlle. Demore’s business partners, I’ve had my suspicions about her for a long time. A woman who climbs so high must be watched with considerable scrutiny.”

Elodie nodded. She was glad that she was not the only one who found Sabina unwomanly.

“I happen to know,” M. Pelletier said, “that Mlle. Demore keeps a box in her study covered with arcane symbols. I believe that this box may contain papers that would be of considerable interest to both of us.”

“A box? With the spells that hold my brother ensorcelled?” Elodie was breathless. This was better than anything she might have hoped for. All she had to do was get the box.

“I do not have access to the Mlle.’s private rooms,” M. Pelletier said, examining his fingernails. “I don’t suppose you might be able to, my dear?”

Elodie opened her mouth to answer and then paused. The man clearly wanted her to do his dirty work, to find leverage on Sabina. Elodie didn’t know the state of Sabina’s business affairs, but Sabina was rich, and rich people were always targets, especially rich women.

Did she care, though, why this man wanted Sabina out of the way? For all she knew, the sorceress might have done something terrible to him. Maybe he simply wanted justice too.
Elodie began to twist the handkerchief, barely noticing when she felt a seam tear under her fingers. No matter what M. Pelletier’s motivations, one fact remained: Sabina had created a rift between Elodie and her brother. Antoine would not cooperate with her, and soon the damage would be irreversible. M. Pelletier, it seemed, was her only hope.

Elodie took a deep breath and gave him a watery, strained smile. “I suppose I might, Monsieur.”

* * *

Sabina’s study was a good-sized room paneled in costly wood, but Elodie barely registered the embellishments. The windows, the door, and the desk were all that held her attention.

The windows were high up and faced the lake. Unless Sabina could transform herself into a bird, there was no way Elodie would be seen from outside. The door was more of an issue, but Elodie had made sure to check that Sabina had already entered her chambers to get dressed for the party. Even if Sabina decided to come to her study before going down to the party, Elodie would be long gone before the older woman finished her toilette.

The desk was a massive piece of furniture made of heavy, dark oak. Elodie had expected to see elaborate carvings of some sort, given Sabina’s usual tastes. Even the halls here held white marble and suits of armor. But the desk was plain except for the papers on top, which were stacked in a hazardous sort of order. Somewhere inside, M. Pelletier had assured her, was the box.
On the right side was a large compartment that looked encouraging. Elodie tugged on the handle. It was locked. Elodie tugged on it again, harder. She knew it wasn’t any use, but she felt a sudden compulsion to try and tear the door off its hinges. Inside was Sabina’s treasure, and Elodie wanted her to feel as raw and aching inside as Elodie herself felt.

She gritted her teeth and took a deep breath. Enticing as they were, these thoughts would not get the door open. Elodie took one of her hairpins out of the knot on the back of her head and got to work. After creating a delicate arrangement of three hairpins, she induced the lock to open.

Elodie smiled in triumph. During all the times when her brother was away, she had found that one could really only devote so much time to drawing and languages and music. When she was not engaged with ladylike arts, playing with locks around the estate had done much to wile away the hours.

The door opened to reveal a compartment that held only a shelf and a vase painted with blue flowers. All satisfaction vanished, and Elodie wanted to scream in frustration. She started to turn away, to find another target, but her thoughts caught up with her and she paused. Such a good lock for just a vase? It was a nice piece, something she might have expected to see in this house, but hardly worth locking away when there was far more expensive artwork languishing in the hallway.

She studied the space for a second longer, and then the answer came to her. After removing the vase, she slid the shelf it rested on out of the compartment. Then she felt around the backboard until a small spring-release met her fingers. Pushing aside the false
wall, she dug into the depths of the desk, eventually emerging with a box roughly the size of a large dictionary.

It was shaped like a jewelry box, held closed by a golden lock and covered in flowing, undecipherable script. Elodie ran her fingers over the strange symbols, shuddering at their alien nature. Then she grabbed a fresh pin from her hair and got to work on the lock.

This time, however, her efforts proved fruitless. No matter what she did, the lock simply would not budge. She frowned resentfully at her prize. Well, she would have to deliver it unopened then.

She placed everything else back where she found it, hefted the box on her hip, and after checking to make sure the coast was clear, scuttled out of the room to join the party.

* * *

Sabina’s ballroom was an oval seamed with columns and capped with a painted dome ceiling. From the shelter of a convenient pillar, Elodie scanned the room quickly, clutching the box to her chest. She spotted her brother almost immediately, dressed in a navy coat with gold trim. Avoiding him would be easy, since he would be too busy dealing with guests to look for her. Sabina, as ever, was much more difficult to predict. She didn’t seem to be down yet.

Finally, she spotted M. Pelletier near an arched window looking out onto the lake. He was stroking his beard and appeared to be contemplating the peaceful scene below but
looked around immediately when she approached. Saying nothing, he grasped her by the elbow and pulled her behind a pillar.

Elodie was beginning to see why balls were used for so many clandestine meetings. The ever-increasing crowd of people, the dense scents of perfume and floral arrangements, the fine clothes, and the small places tucked into the corners of the room all seemed to give the event an air of adventure. She smiled at M. Pelletier, clutching the box harder to her chest.

“You have it?” he said in a harsh whisper. “Let me see it.”

Elodie held the box out to him, making sure the side with the lock faced him. He gave the box a quick inspection, nodded, and attempted to open it.

“I can’t get it open,” Elodie said. “We might need a locksmith for it.”

M. Pelletier frowned and tapped his fingers impatiently against the lid. “I was hoping that I would be able to remove the papers that we need and then return the box to its place in the study. That would be best.”

“I know,” Elodie said. Her entire being churned with impatience. Her brother’s salvation was right at her fingertips. Perhaps the monsieur would have some bright ideas.

M. Pelletier took a small penknife from his belt and started fiddling with the lock. He was much clumsier at it than she had been. “Damn thing,” he muttered. “Damn witch.”

Elodie giggled a little at the insult. Then she froze when a voice behind her said, “Elodie?”
She swallowed hard and turned slowly to look over her shoulder. Sure enough, there was her brother. She watched as Antoine’s eyes took in her, the man in front of her, and the box in her hands. His face clouded over.

“Explain, Elodie,” he said. “Please don’t make me regret bringing you here.”

Elodie scrambled to find words, but it was hard to think with Antoine’s eyes on her. She had never been scared of her brother before. Now his eyes were cold, and his expression was as hard and distant as a mountainside.

It reminded her of Sabina.

Elodie swallowed again and forced out her words. “Antoine, there’s sorcery at work here, I’m sure of it. I tried to tell you before, and look.” She held up the box in her arms. “This box contains her spells. This is the source of her foul magic!”

“Magic?”

Sabina materialized beside them, clad in a midnight blue gown strewn with pure white seed pearls.

Through her shock, a part of Elodie thought bitterly that of course she would be wearing pearls.

Sabina stood there for a moment, examining each person in turn. No one answered her. Finally, she shook her head and took the box from Elodie. She ran her thumb over the lock, and Elodie heard it click as though Sabina was springing a simple latch instead of opening a lock.

Elodie shot a glance at Antoine, but he was completely unruffled by this casual display of sorcery. She was starting to wonder if she was going mad. Was she truly the only one who could see it?
Sabina opened the lid, revealing a neat stack of papers and a pile of letters beside them. “This is my letter box,” she said. Her eyes were locked on Elodie. “It also contains important business documents that I do not want to share with prying eyes. That’s why they were locked up.”

Elodie wetted her lips. “The symbols?”

“Are from my mother’s country,” Sabina said, gently tracing the carvings. “They are foreign but not arcane.”

It was difficult to picture Sabina having a mother. Elodie’s throat grew thick again with panic.

Meanwhile, Sabina turned her attention to M. Pelletier, who had not said a word through the proceedings. “Monsieur,” she said. “Might I ask why you were trying to tamper with one of my personal possessions?”

He gave her a gentle, good-natured smile. “Why, I had no idea it was yours. This young lady asked me if I might help her open it, and I was happy to oblige. How was I to know that she was up to mischief?”

A sputter of indignation died on Elodie’s lips as she looked at her brother, who now resembled a statue.

“Why did you take the box from Sabina’s desk?” he asked. His voice was calm. Steady. It sounded alien to her.

“It was…to prove…” She looked at Sabina, with her dark dress and darker eyes. Her long, white hair was unbound, and in the lamplight it looked like a snakeskin that had only been half abandoned.
“Go upstairs, Elodie,” she heard Antoine say. “We’ll deal with you in the morning.”

The words cut through her and snapped whatever cord that was keeping her in place. She took off at a most unseemingly pace, pushing guests out of her path as she rushed to the doors.

*   *   *

She hated the tears streaming down her cheeks. She hated Antoine’s words, echoing in her head, dismissing her as a nuisance and an idiot. Most of all, she hated Sabina, watching Elodie’s humiliation as though it were a not particularly interesting play that she was considering abandoning altogether.

Elodie ran through creamy halls, unaware of her direction, only knowing that she wanted to move, to scream, to do something other than sit in her room and cry like the child her brother always saw when he looked at her.

There was a suit of armor stationed on the wall ahead of her. On impulse she stopped, catching glimpses of her movement reflected in the mirror-bright metal. The suit held a mace. She grabbed it.

It was a heavy thing, made to be wielded by a person thick with muscle. But Elodie was angry and in a fever to do some damage. She managed to aim a low swing at the wall and smiled at the reverberating thud, and the long scratches that the mace’s spikes carved into the marble. She looked around for something more satisfying to hit and found the door of the Nursery.
There was so much. The marble shrieked under her weapon, the pipes groaned as they dented. She snatched oysters out of the pools and wrought havoc, sending pearls and fragments of shell alike flying across the floor. Some part of her knew that there would be guilt later, because even she had to admit that this place had been as beautiful as it was eerie. But it was Sabina’s place, first and foremost, and right now that was all Elodie could think about.

She was breathing hard when she finally got to the small, deep pool at the very center of the room.

It was shaped like a funnel, narrowing down to a point. At the very bottom was a small silver vessel that resembled an eggcup. Inside the cup was a round object, shining white with threads of black.

Elodie frowned, curiosity breaking through her haze. She had to lie flat on her stomach in order to retrieve the object. It felt oddly fragile when she gripped it with the tips of her fingers.

When she held the object at eye-level to examine it, her fingers trembled and she almost dropped it. In every way it seemed like an exquisite white pearl, except for the black veins that wreathed it. These veins seemed to pulse slightly, as though the globe had some kind of heartbeat.

Elodie hesitated, caught between disgust and fascination.

“Wait!”

Elodie’s body jerked as once again Sabina caught her unawares. But even before she found the older woman silhouetted in the doorway, she knew that this time would be different. No longer was Sabina’s voice the cool and controlled monotone that Elodie had
come to loathe. There was tension in it, a breathlessness that indicated that she had come
to the room at a run. She was afraid, and Elodie shuddered with the thrill of it. She stood
slowly and faced the door, the black-veined pearl cupped in her hand.

“Free my brother from your foul sorcery,” she said, “and I will put your bauble
back in the pool.”

Sabina’s eyes were filled with a sharp, crackling energy that seemed to infect her
entire body. Her hands clenched and unclenched in the folds of her dark blue gown.
“There is no sorcery. Your brother is marrying me entirely of his own free will. I’m sorry
that this distresses you, but it is not fair to punish me for a mutual decision.”

Elodie’s grip tightened on the pearl. She started to voice another threat when
Antoine burst into the room. Just behind him, M. Pelletier slunk in as well.

Antoine’s jaw dropped as he surveyed the room and the damage. He opened his
mouth to shout at her, and Elodie tried to clasp her hands over her ears, one hand still
squeezing the pearl. She didn’t want to hear any more, not his anger, not his scorn. The
pearl rocked perilously in her hold, and she took a hand off her ear just in time to hear
Sabina say, in almost her old voice, “M. Pelletier, this is the second time tonight that you
have trespassed on personal ground. May I ask what you are doing here?” She gestured in
a way that enveloped Antoine, Elodie, and the wreckage. “This is clearly a family
matter.”

“I beg to differ, Mlle.,” Pelletier said, flicking an errant drop of water from his
jacket. “All of this damage will take quite some time to repair. I imagine that certain
orders will be delayed for an indeterminate amount of time.”
“The extent of the damage is still unknown,” Sabina said. “I’ll have reports ready in a few days.”

“Ah,” Pelletier said. “But just think how much easier it would be to simply give us instructions on how to make certain pearls. You know we have the facilities for it. And just think of how much simpler everything will be. You can focus on your wedding and the repairs, without any upset clients to hamper your attention.”

This speech might have been mediocre chamber music, for all the effect it had on Sabina. “That will not be necessary,” she said, turning her back on him. “Elodie, if you would put down the pearl so that we can finish our discussion, I would appreciate it.”

Pelletier’s expression turned ugly at her words and flat tone. His eyes darted around the room until they came to rest on Elodie.

“Girl,” he cried. “Break whatever is in your hand. It will destroy her power, I swear it!”

Elodie hesitated. Her harsh emotions were starting to drain away, unable to sustain themselves. She had already sampled the monsieur’s promises and found them lacking. A sense of exhaustion descended on her, and suddenly she wanted nothing more than to leave the room and find her bed.

She started to lower the pearl towards the water. For a second the pearl hovered over the marble, cradled securely in her palms.

Something hit her head, hard. A shard of oyster shell fell to the floor as Elodie pitched forward. The pearl was flung up in the air, white and black alike glowing in the soft lamplight, and shattered against the floor, sending shards skittering across the marble.
There was a breath of hushed silence, almost immediately broken by M. Pelletier. “There,” he said. “Ignore me now, witch.”

Sabina’s head had bowed as the pearl hit the floor. Now she raised her eyes to M. Pelletier, and for a second Elodie could not decide what was different about them. Then she saw it. The whites of her eyes had turned as black and fathomless as her pupils.

“You wish to have my full attention, M. Pelletier?” she said. “Very well.”

Her form seemed to come loose all at once, her limbs elongating and her hair swirling around her. Elodie gasped, and the next thing she knew there was a dragon in their midst, white and ethereal as a ghost standing in moonlight. But no mere scales covered this dragon. Instead, white pearls covered the slopes of her shoulders, wrapped around her legs, and dripped down her long whip-like tail. On her belly the pearls darkened, taking on a grey luster. As the dragon raised her head, Elodie saw a single black pearl nestled in the hollow of her throat. It began to vibrate as the creature inhaled.

The dragon pursed its lips and spat a long lance of flame at M. Pelletier. The blaze was so hot that Elodie covered her face and leaned back, even from several feet away.

When she looked again, the water of the pool that had been nearest Pelletier was swirling black with ashes.

The dragon coughed slightly, as though to clear its throat. Then the black eyes came to rest on Elodie.

She froze, instantly aware that it was all her fault, everything was her fault, and now the woman she had insulted and stolen from, the creature she had never wanted to call sister, was going to destroy her where she stood. She closed her eyes, waiting for the flames.
They didn’t come.

Elodie opened her eyes. Sabina, or the creature that had been Sabina, was no longer looking at her. Instead, she gazed around the once-elegant room, her Nursery, and gave a low, mournful cry that reverberated in Elodie’s bones.

Sabina looked at Antoine and made the same cry. Antoine, for all the excitement, did not look particularly surprised to see his fiancé transformed into a dragon. He only nodded as though she had spoken, and gave her a stiff, formal wave of farewell.

Sabina flicked her tail in reply. Then she dissolved, her white scales becoming mist, and the mist climbing up to the room’s high windows and flowing out into the darkened sky. In seconds, there was nothing left of her.

For a moment, the siblings stood in silence. Then Elodie turned to Antoine, feeling as though something had just dawned on her. “You truly wanted to marry her?” she asked.

Antoine gave her a look of pure exasperation. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“I’ve never known anyone so spectacular,” he said, making his habitual sigh.

Elodie thought back to the great, black eyes and glistening pearl hide. And even before that, to a calm, patient woman who was wily enough to get what she wanted. A shivering sort of guilt came over her and she wept, again. She was so tired of weeping.

Antoine’s arm crept around her shoulder, pulling her close, pulling her to safe harbor.

She pushed his arm aside and walked out of the Nursery for the last time.
Weaving

The boy was back again. Kaawa blinked hard and turned her face out of the wind, trying to clear her vision.

It was early summer, which meant that Kaawa was working to get her sheep sheared. She always took the animals to browse on the grass that grew near the river, a small, ribbon-shaped oasis cutting through the rocky ground and thorny plants of the high desert. Now that it was summer, the orange- and red-streaked stones acquired a soft covering of gray-green foliage, the monsoon winds started to pick up from the west, and her sheep began to complain under the weight of their wool.

Perhaps it was the physical exertion, or perhaps the wind was particularly strong that morning, but she was having trouble keeping her eyes clear of visions. Her ability to pluck images from the moving wind had faded to an ember long ago, along with the rest of her magic. Every once in a while though, there was a day when they would plague her with every breeze.

Today was one of those days. As she turned around, reaching for another sheep, the wind showed her a great plume of dust out in the desert, indicating a party of many riders. Then, closer, a boy crouched by the river, peering out at her through the trees.

She blinked the images away and turned her head to look out of the corner of her eye. Sure enough, there was the boy, huddled behind a large pine. He had a troubled look on his face and seemed far too clean and timid to be part of the pack of children who came around sometimes to devil her.

Kaawa chewed on her lip and then turned back to what she was doing. Whatever he wanted, he would let her know eventually. In the meantime, she had work to do.
The sheep might be hot as coals under all of their wool, but that didn’t mean that they made the shearing easy for her. The buggers bawled like they were dying as she cut away the thick layers of fleece, coming away with dirty handfuls of the scratchy, greasy material from which she made her living.

On the last day of shearing, she straightened carefully, one hand massaging the muscles of her lower back. She could still manage to shear her greatly diminished flock by herself, but she knew that the day when she could no longer do so was on the horizon. At moments like these, she could feel the wear of all of her sixty years on her body, and thinking of the future only made her more tired.

She glanced towards the trees where the boy usually concealed himself, suddenly worried that he might take advantage of her weakened state and do her mischief. Not that she had much to take anymore. An old house that held only a few scarred possessions. A flock of forty sheep when once she had over two hundred.

The spot where the boy usually hid was empty. Perhaps he had finally realized that whatever old tales he might have heard in town, there was nothing much left.

Kaawa turned away and started to lug the wool back to her empty home.

* * *

Apparently the boy hadn’t learned anything after all, because he returned the next day. This time, there were no trees to shelter him. Kaawa was camped out in front of her house, a battered cottage that stood alone on a flat stretch of desert a few miles outside of
town. Armed with paddles and several washbasins, she was scouring the wool, cleaning out the worst of the dirt, vegetation, and grease.

She was dragging a paddle through one of the tubs when the boy arrived. Up close, it was even clearer that he didn’t belong here. He was about twelve, his wooly black hair cut neatly close to his scalp. The brown vest and white shirt that he wore had clearly started the day starched and pressed, though they hadn’t weathered the desert’s dust all that well. He glanced curiously at the basins, and Kaawa figured that he must be a town boy through and through to be unfamiliar with shearing.

Nevertheless, he gave her a polite nod and said, “Good day, Mistress Kaawa. I would like to speak with you, if I may.”

Kaawa looked pointedly down at the tub she labored over. “I’ve got a lot of work to do, boy. If you have something to say, just say it.”

The boy’s polite mask dissolved into a look of keen discomfort. His eyes flicked rapidly between her and the ground. Kaawa watched with growing amusement as he lifted his head and folded his hands in front of him.

“How would like you to teach me magic,” he said with dignity.

All amusement vanished. “No,” she said.

The boy’s lips pinched together in a stubborn line. “I need you to teach me,” he insisted.

The wool she was cleaning snagged hard on the paddle, nearly pulling it out of her hands. “You don’t need anything,” she said, tugging on the implement. “Except to go home and let your servants clean you up.”
He blushed at that. “That’s fine for you to say,” he said. “But I’m not going to have a home to go back to if I don’t learn magic.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. “I can’t say that I’ve been to town for a while. Are you claiming that in the last month or so witchery has suddenly become respectable, and your folks are after you to learn it?”

He scuffed at the dirt with his shoe, starting to fidget under her scrutiny. “Not exactly,” he said.

“Not exactly. Then what, exactly, are you talking about?”

“We’re going to lose the store,” he said.

She gave him an impatient look, and he started over.

“I’m Jarli Ngonde,” he said, straightening a little bit. “My father has made some bad investments. And…other decisions.”

Gambling debts, Kaawa thought, stifling a snort.

“Now everyone at home is saying that if one more thing goes wrong, we’re going to be out on the street,” he said.

The boy, Jarli, she supposed, had an expressive face, and now every line of it was pleading with her.

“He’s going to mess up again. I want to do something, anything. I can’t right now, but if I had magic…”

Kaawa held up a hand and he stopped.

“All right, boy,” she said. “There are several things wrong with your proposition.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but she cut him off with an abrupt gesture. “First of all, when folks like your family say ‘We’re going to be out on the street.’ they don’t
usually mean that. You people have been wealthy and connected for quite some time, current disaster notwithstanding. Even if you lose the store, you’ll find a way to live. Maybe not the kind of living you’re used to, but you’ll hardly be the first to make that adjustment.” She threw a wry glance back at her own worn down home. “Second, magic won’t solve your problems even if they were as serious as you seem to think.”

“But…” The boy tried to interrupt, but she wasn’t having it.

“No ‘buts’! Let me finish. Magic will not get your father to change his habits. It will not hand you instant wealth. Magic is a powerful tool, but it doesn’t work miracles.” She grimaced as Ellin’s face flashed through her mind. “And third, there is no way I’m helping goddamned Ngonde out of his mess.”

Jarli, who had appeared to be about to burst with his desire to contradict her, blinked. “You know my father?”

Kaawa waved an impatient hand. “Your grandfather, actually. But I doubt there’s much of a difference. Let’s just say there’s no love lost between us. Your father won’t be happy to hear that you are here asking for magic lessons, and I have no desire to meddle in his affairs. If Ngonde is about to tumble off his high horse, then I have nothing to say except ‘good riddance.’”

Ngonde, owner of the largest general store in town, had not been happy to share prominence with some “barbaric, unmannered witch,” back when she had been at her peak. When she lost everything, he responded with nothing short of glee, and teamed up with several proprietors to drive her further into poverty. He couldn’t get rid of her without breaking the law, but he did manage to make her life damned uncomfortable for a while.
Not that she had summoned much ire, or anything else, at the time. Ellin was dead, and nothing else mattered. That didn’t mean that she would ever be inclined to do the bastards any favors.

Memories were starting to fill her mind now. Ellin laughing, Ellin spinning, Ellin beside her, churning wool with the paddle and complaining about the heat.

“Mistress Kaawa,” Jarli said. “I didn’t know about your history with my family, but…”

“I thought I said “no buts,’” Kaawa said. “Leave.”

He took a step backward.

“Leave!”

He left, running without care through the scrub, making new tears in his clothes and no doubt leaving some of his blood on the thorns.

* * *

It took the boy a few days to come back. Kaawa was gathering her wool cards when she saw him standing like a lone, wind-beaten pine in front of her house. “You are one stupid boy,” she said. “I’m sure your family despairs of you.”

He shrugged, looking at her with eyes as big and brown as an owl’s.

“What do you think you would do with magic anyway?” she asked, sitting down on a chair that she’d dragged outside and selecting a clump of wool.

The boy gnawed on his lower lip. “I don’t know yet,” he admitted. “I just know that if I had magic I would be able to do something. Anything.”
Kaawa shook her head. “I don’t know what they told you over in town,” she said. “But magic doesn’t work like that. It won’t make your troubles go away.”

“You used to magic away troubles, once,” Jarli said. “Granny says that you used to send storms off with a wave of your hand. And when buyers tried to drive the wool prices down, you looked at them and waved your fingers, and they would give you whatever price you wanted. She said that you even convinced a girl to…” He stopped, his cheeks darkening.

Kaawa scowled at him, trying to tamp down her anger. It wasn’t his fault that his family was ignorant and foolish. “Only the first of those things was magic, boy. The second was intimidation and business smarts, and the third…” She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly through her nose. “…Is none of your business.”

Jarli shrank under her gaze but quickly recovered enough to ask, “The first one was magic, right? Controlling storms? Will you show me?”

Kaawa huffed in exasperation. “Have you been listening to a word I’ve said? Go away, boy. I have work to do.”

“If I help you with the carding, will you show me magic?”

Kaawa started to tell him to leave again and then hesitated. Carding was not easy work, and there was a small mountain of wool waiting to for her to tease out the dirt and bits of vegetation. Already her arms were starting to ache with the exertion of it. If the boy wanted to waste his time chasing magic, it might be worth her while to let him, at least until the wool was ready to be sold.

She gestured for him to sit, and he grabbed a pair of cards and settled on the ground.
Kaawa breathed deeply and slowly waved the fingers of her right hand, trying to wind the air currents between them. Once she could have had a rope of wind at her command in seconds. Now it took a full minute just to find a thread.

Finally, she felt it, a tiny current running around her fingers. She twirled her hand clumsily and sent the air spiraling towards the earth.

A miniature tornado materialized as it hit the ground, the end of its funnel quickly devouring reddish-brown dirt until the entire twister was tinged with sienna.

Jarli gasped. He watched in wonder as the twister scoured the ground in front of them and then slowly dissipated as Kaawa released the air that comprised it. Kaawa noticed with some interest that he didn’t seem frightened by the display, as most of the people in town had been back when casual magics had been a part of her everyday life. His excitement was like Ellin’s, unhindered by doubt or unease.

She winced at the thought. Ellin seemed to haunt her more often when she spoke with Jarli.

He turned back to Kaawa. “Can I learn to do that?”

“I have no idea,” Kaawa said. “Not just anyone can learn magic. If you’re asking if I’ll teach you though, the answer is still no.”

He answered her with big, owl eyes.

She sighed. “I’m old and sad, boy. There’s nothing left in me except party tricks.”

Silence fell over them like a shroud. Jarli diligently, if clumsily, attacked the wool between his cards. There was a thoughtful wrinkle between his brows.

“What’s magic good for then?” he asked. “If it can’t solve your problems, what’s the point?”
Kaawa looked at the wool in her lap. As she carded it, the fibers became as fine and wispy as the clouds overhead.

“It can be used as a weapon,” she said. “To protect what is yours. But its most reliable use is to gain knowledge.”

“Knowledge?” Jarli asked.

Kaawa nodded. “Anyone from a street urchin to your grandfather knows that success comes from knowing the lay of the land and using that information effectively. Magic helps you see further and deeper than you ever could imagine possible.” A wave of longing swept over her. Even now, she still missed walking the skies, looking down at the earth from a balcony of clouds, the wind both holding her up and piercing her to the bone. There was truly nothing like it.

Jarli’s voice reached her through her daydreams. “If I had magic, do you think I would know what to do? To save the store?”

Kaawa shrugged, staring into the dirt at her feet. “You’re asking the wrong person. Look around, boy. Magic didn’t help me save anything.”

Jarli fidgeted. Between the sun overhead and the wool in his lap, a sheen of sweat had covered his skin, making his cheeks and forehead gleam as though he had just emerged from a cloudbank himself.

“I’m sorry about your friend,” he said. He sounded remarkably grave and sincere for a boy of twelve.

Kaawa looked away. “Me too.” She felt that she should probably say something more, but she couldn’t imagine what. No one from town had ever offered her sympathy before.
The wind picked up, and once again Kaawa found herself rubbing dust and visions out of her eyes. The large party of riders was now travelling through a sunken basin. She blinked, and they were replaced by mud-colored horses drawing an old coach down a road. And, finally, a pack of children running through the brush.

The landscape and the children in the last image looked distinctly familiar. Sure enough, by the time Kaawa had cleared her sight, she could already hear the children approaching. Jarli heard them too, and his back was tense as he turned in the direction of the sound.

Kaawa, meanwhile, retrieved the sling that she kept ready on a peg by the front door. Children could be devils at times, and the last thing she needed was her wool thrown all over the desert.

There were seven or eight of them, boys and girls, with ages anywhere between ten and thirteen. Their clothing was ripped and dirty, and they were in a state of great excitement, running about, pushing each other over and giggling. Whatever mischief the children had in mind though, they stopped short when they caught sight of Jarli.

“Oy!” one of them, an older boy, said. “What are you doing here, fancypants?”

Jarli plucked a bit of wool off his trousers and returned it the pile beside him.

“None of your business,” he said.

“Ooooh,” the crowd crooned, laughing.

“Playing with the witch, are you?” the older boy said. “Did you ask her to turn your father into a toad? Maybe then he wouldn’t lose all your money.”

Jarli jumped to his feet, his newly carded wool falling to the ground. “Shut your mouth,” he said. “My family is no concern of yours.”
“Does your family know you’re here?” the boy asked. “Playing with witches?”

Jarli glowered at him.

“Didn’t think so,” the boy said, grinning. “I wonder what they would say ‘bout your new friend?”

Jarli’s lips curled into a sneer. “They’d say that business is business,” he said.

Business now, was it? Kaawa kept carding, listening to the adolescent spat without comment. Still, it was interesting to know what the youngster thought of her. She’d keep that remark in mind the next time she needed to say no to the boy. There were no favors in business.

A movement on the horizon caught her eye, and Kaawa squinted to make it out. It was a dust cloud, one that slowly resolved into the coach that she had just seen on the wind. The coach was an elderly black vehicle that covered the rocky ground with all the grace of an old, reluctant hog. Coaches like these were a common enough sight, but Kaawa and the children remained still, watching it draw nearer and nearer. Finally the carriage stopped in front of the assembly, its wheels creaking, the coachman stiff and silent. The curtain drew back from the window, and a woman peered out.

She wore a hat heaped with roses, tied under her chin with white ribbons that contrasted nicely with her light brown skin. Kaawa thought she looked vaguely familiar but couldn’t place her.

This turned out not to be an issue, because the woman did not acknowledge her. Many townspeople still didn’t. Instead, the woman focused on the children, taking in the tableau with slightly narrowed eyes.
“Jarli,” she said. “What are you doing way out here? It’s time for your piano lesson.”

Jarli looked like a cornered hare, trapped between Kaawa, the pack of children, and the woman in the coach. Apparently he thought the first question was best left unanswered, because he just said, “I’m sorry, Mother. The piano lesson must have slipped my mind.”

He brushed off his pants, or tried to. There were several clumps of wool still clinging to them. He walked stiffly to the coach, and Kaawa thought she might finally be seeing the last of him. Then he recovered some of his gumption and called to her over his shoulder. “I’ll see you another day, Mistress Kaawa.”

“No you won’t,” the woman said.

There was a pause as the pair exchanged remarkably similar glares.

The son broke first. He stepped into the carriage like a king going to the chopping block. His mother continued to stare out the window, frowning. Her eyes met Kaawa’s for a split second before she reached up and pulled the heavy curtain over the window. Horses and coach alike sprayed dirt and rocks in every direction as they turned back toward the town.

*   *   *

Kaawa went to bed early that night, her arms sore from carding and her head aching from all the company the day had inflicted on her. Damn the boy. He and his wretched family could just stay the hell away from her. Business indeed.
She pushed the thoughts away as exhaustion settled on her like a warm and familiar blanket.

That night, however, the wind made sleep no easy task. Her home’s thick, well-sealed walls kept visions from her eyes, but the storm still managed to buffet Kaawa’s dreams. Flames streamed from the windows, and the wind was filled with the screams of dying sheep. The river drank their blood thirstily, and Kaawa knew she should put a stop to it but, Ellin, where was she? Soft, smiling Ellin, Ellin of the brown ringlets and small, calloused hands. Ellin, who had never feared her, even in her greatest days when the storms had come to her whistle and grown men hardly dared to look her in the eye.

Kaawa ran into the desert without heed for the thorns. Soon a thicket of needles was entrenched in her left calf and blood started trickling from cuts in her hands. The horizon stretched in every direction, brown hills under grey sky. She demanded that the wind give her sight, and it obeyed, streaming past her eyes like a spool of rope, images caught in the threads.

It took a long time. Too long, picture after picture of empty desert, shadowed canyons, sheltered pockets of grass curled around the river. Then, finally, horses riding hard, herding bleating sheep before them, and there, draped over a horse, was Ellin with a dark bruise across her eye. The person who held her had a scarf over their face, no features distinguishable. Kaawa traced their figure in her mind’s eye, committing the slouch, the outline, to memory, because she knew that whoever that was, they were not long for this world.

* * *

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A knock woke her. At first, Kaawa wondered if it was a part of her dream, some god’s footsteps making her head throb. But no, she opened her eyes, and the sun was creeping through the window, touching the dirty dishes in the washbin, the heap of uncarded wool from the previous day, and the burn-scarred walls that no longer held even a whiff of smoke. Kaawa was watching flecks of sun dance around a long smudgy mark when the knock came again, sharp and urgent.

“Hold your horses,” she said, easing herself out of bed and grabbing a shawl. She opened the door a crack and peered out. In front of her stood the woman from yesterday. Her hat was gone, and her eyes were frantic and bloodshot.

Kaawa frowned. “Your boy’s not here,” she said.

“I know,” she said. “I need your help.”

Kaawa glared at her.

The woman looked at her with big, brown eyes, the same as her son’s. “Please,” she said.

Kaawa grimaced and opened the door.

There was no place to sit other than the kitchen table, so Kaawa motioned for the woman to take a chair. She did so, glancing furtively at the corners of the room.

“There’s no dead bodies in here,” Kaawa said. “Why don’t you tell me why you’ve come?”

The woman fiddled with a button on one of her gloves. As Kaawa studied her face, she realized where she knew her from. She had been a girl the last time Kaawa gave her any notice, one of the town belles. Kaawa and Ellin had been in town, picking up
supplies when they passed her on the street. The girl was a neat little thing then, wearing a straw bonnet and carrying a posy of primroses. Ellin commented on how pretty she looked, like springtime. Their relationship was still new and untried at the time, and jealousy seized Kaawa for a brief, burning instant. She even sent a breeze to play with the girl’s bonnet strings, to make her squeal and hop in the street. Ellin had just rolled her eyes.

After the dream this memory should have been a little bit of nothing, but recollecting it still made Kaawa cringe. She honestly didn’t know how Ellin had put up with her.

The woman still hadn’t spoken, so Kaawa tried a different tack. “What’s your name?”

“Merindah Ngonde,” she replied, toneless and automatic.

“I know you’re a Ngonde,” Kaawa said. “You’re the boy’s mother, right? Speaking of which, why are you the one bothering me today and not him?”

Merindah’s face tightened. “He’s gone. He ran back into the desert this morning. To see you, I think. Bandits took him.”

The words seemed to hang, suspended in the air. Kaawa thought suddenly of the huge dust cloud out in the desert that the wind kept showing her. Her skin crawled. So near. They’d been practically on her doorstep.

“Have you received a ransom demand?” she asked.

Merindah nodded, a white rim around her lips.

“Well, pay it and then you’ll get your boy back,” Kaawa said. “Why are you here chatting with me instead of gathering the money together?”
“We don’t have it.”

Kaawa blinked, the reason for Jarli’s intrusion into her life suddenly coming back to her. “Not even for this?” she asked. “Ngonde can’t even scrape up the cash for his own son?”

“We don’t have it!” The words seemed to burst out of her like a spider from the egg. “Ngonde, he…” She stopped and took a breath. “My husband lost a great deal of money this quarter. And the last quarter. And the one before that. His older brothers say they won’t bail us out again, not for any reason. The store won’t survive the next rainy season otherwise.”

Kaawa thought of Jarli, out in the desert, trying to convince his captors that he was not worth the money that they sought. Bandits must hear a great deal of things from their captives, and Kaawa doubted that they would believe him. They would hang on to him long enough to squeeze the money out of Ngonde or they would kill him, to prove to the world that their band’s threats were sincere. Her heart clenched as she thought of him. Jarli. And Ellin. God, Ellin.

She returned her focus to Merindah. “Why are you here?” she asked, once again.

Thrice was the charm.

“I want you to get my son back,” Merindah said. Her eyes could have burned holes through stone. “They sent a mole in to lame several of the town’s best horses. Any party the town sends won’t be able to catch the bandits before they enter the canyon lands. But you could.”

Kaawa snorted. “And what would I do if I caught them? It didn’t make any difference, last time.”
“It was close,” Merindah insisted. “And they won’t be as vigilant as they were when they took your…friend. Your reputation has waned enough that they won’t consider you a threat.”

And with excellent reason. Kaawa wasn’t certain she could still find a band of fleeing bandits, let alone catch up and stop them. And for what? A boy who had done nothing but pester her, and who would undoubtedly grow up to be another man in a coach with the curtains always drawn.

Kaawa looked up across the table, ready to tell Merindah to leave and take her troubles with her. Instead, she met a pair of tear-stained eyes.

“Please,” Merindah whispered.

Then it was another day, a day when sunlight had poured over the fresh-scrubbed floor and reflected off Ellin’s pretty, white teeth. “Please,” Ellin said. “The bandits have been really bad this year. Can’t you do something?”

“What kind of something?” Kaawa asked as she gathered her bags. She was preparing to go down to a nearby port city to trade her wool.

“Scare them?” said Ellin. “Maybe call a storm to keep them from raiding?”

“That would take a hell of a lot of storms,” Kaawa said. “There are limits to what I can do, Ellin. Scaring bandits out of pursuing their livelihood is different from intimidating superstitious wool merchants.”

“I know we could think of something,” Ellin insisted. She grabbed a broom and began to sweep the floor fiercely. “We could drive them out of the area for good. Wouldn’t that be wonderful? Everyone would love you then, no matter what they thought about magic.”
Kaawa looked up from her bags, her eyebrows raised. “Is that what this is about? Everyone loving me?”

Ellin’s sweeping slowed. “Well, yes and no. Getting rid of the bandits would be its own reward. But don’t you want people to like you?”

“Not really.”

“Don’t you want to talk to people? To nod to folk on the street and have them nod back?”

Kaawa snorted. “Why would I care about that? Why would you care about that? Am I not enough for you?”

Ellin made an impatient sound. “You know that I love you. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

Kaawa waited.

“But it would be nice, sometimes, to see another friendly face.”

“So you’re going to make friends by sending me out to fight bandits?” Kaawa asked. “How kind. Why don’t you just kill me and be done with it?”

Ellin glared at her, her hands clenching the broom as though she wanted to whack Kaawa with it. “That wasn’t what I meant at all. You shouldn’t say things like that.”

“Shouldn’t I?”

“No you shouldn’t!” Bright spots appeared on her cheeks. “You know, this is just the sort of thing people dislike you for, Kaawa. Not just the magic, or even our relationship. Sometimes, you’re just cruel for no reason at all.”

“Well, why don’t you go find someone more agreeable then?”

“You’re the one who’s going.”
“What?” Kaawa said, surprise making her forget her next insult.

“I don’t want to see you for a while, and you were planning on going to the port anyway,” said Ellin, taking up her sweeping again. “So go. Go without me.”

Kaawa felt remorse start to steal over her. She took a step forward. “Ellin…”

“Please go.”

Kaawa shut her eyes. When she opened them again, it was Merindah who sat across from her. Kaawa regarded her for a moment that seemed to stretch into infinity. Then she looked out the window, studying the sky.

“Let me get a few things together,” she said.

* * *

Calling the magic back was like stretching an old, disused limb.

Kaawa stood on a rise, using the large swell of land to gain full access to the sky. The wind plucked at her clothes like a restless child. She tried to grab handfuls of the air and twist it into a rope that she could bring up to her eyes, but every time she grasped a breeze it resisted her, trickling out between her fingers. She growled in frustration and looked out at the horizon.

Unaided, she could still see a great deal from her perch. The hills were the gray-green of summer, the river twisting through them like a serpent before slamming into the great flame-colored cliffs to the east. That way lay more gullies and gorges and canyons than anyone could count. Sending her winds there would be like sending hounds to search a rabbit warren. She had to find these bandits before they reached them.
She tried to grip the winds harder, but they kept splintering. It used to be so easy. How had she done it?

Kaawa took a deep breath, choking a bit as the air caught in her throat. Muscle by muscle, she forced herself to relax. It was difficult, terribly so, with Ellin so close to her thoughts and every moment bringing Jarli closer to the canyon lands. But she did it. Slowly, she unhooked her consciousness and sent it up to the heavens, to rediscover the trick to weaving wind.

She’d always liked how the world looked from above, becoming a thick quilt of shapes and patterns. Hills and valleys became lumps in the fabric, the river a darting silver thread. The canyon lands transformed into a gaudy patch of orange cleaved by sharp lines of burnt umber. She looked for horsemen, just to see if she could catch a lucky flash of movement, but there was nothing. She was too far up to spot such small human details.

Once she had spent a great deal of time up here. It had made her feel like a goddess, surveying the earth like a spider suspended over its web. Indeed, she might have spent days hanging up here drinking in the splendor if not for Ellin.

One clear day, Ellin had come out to one of Kaawa’s favorite spots, a large rock-studded hill. “What do you do when you send out your spirit?” Ellin asked.

“Watch,” she replied. “Look at the land.” The air was gentle that day, warm without being heavy.

“Watch what?” asked Ellin.
Kaawa couldn’t find the words. Instead, she seized Ellin by the arm and stepped into the air. She wove miniature platforms beneath their feet, and it was like going for a stroll down an intangible garden path.

She thought Ellin might squeal or cling to her. Instead she said, “Huh."

“Huh? Is that all you have to say?”

Rather than latching on the swiftly retreating ground, Ellin’s eyes followed the strands of wind beneath her bare feet. “You spin it before you shape it, right? Condense it down to thread you can work with. I can’t see you doing it, but I can feel it. It tickles!”

She looked into Kaawa’s bemused eyes and blushed. “I’d just always wondered how you did it,” she said. “Your magic.”

The memory faded, and Kaawa let herself fall, down, down, down, back into her body. She flexed her fingers experimentally, found a breeze, and gave it a hard spin. It twisted obediently, becoming neat and serviceable in her hands.

Kaawa smiled, slowly. The muscles there felt nearly as stiff as her arms. But, stiffness and all, her hands began to fly, spinning and spooling and weaving, and the world opened to her sight.

* * *

She found them in a rift between two hills, not far from the canyon lands. They must have pushed their horses hard to make such good time. Luckily for her, they had decided to camp early in the evening rather than risk turning down the wrong canyon in the gathering dusk. Kaawa strode as quickly as she could, one eye on the wind bringing her
images of the bandits, the other on the purpling sky around her. Her hands had remembered the trick to weaving platforms of air by then, and the winds propelled her forward at a fast clip. Up here, the hills and thorns could not slow her down.

The sky still held some light when she finally caught up. Kaawa let herself down in a sparse copse of pine trees about a mile away from the bandit camp. If possible, she would prefer to enter the camp unnoticed, grab the boy, and leap into the air before the bandits could realize what was happening and object.

She shivered, remembering her mad flight to reach Ellin. She had not been able to take her eyes off the wind bearing the picture of her lover, hurt, bleeding, a ransom ticket for the wealth that the bandits were certain she possessed but could not find. Those bandits had been slower than these new ones, hampered as they were by the sheep they had stolen from her. Kaawa had flown after them like an arrow, wavering through the wind currents, slicing, unheeding, through clouds. Slammed to the ground directly in front of their horse train, standing in the road like an army at a pass. So clumsy, yet so certain that nothing truly important could be broken.

There would be no more grand entrances for Kaawa in this lifetime. She approached the edges of the camp, a small, haphazard collection of tents and tired horses arranged in a loose circle. Kaawa kept low and placed her dun-colored shawl over her head to blend in better with the landscape. A quick check with her breezes allowed her to slip behind an unoccupied tent and peer into the center of the camp.

It was different. She knew it would be, different faces, different voices. And yet somehow, it was like time and space had folded, and one second she was back in the middle of the road, facing a sneering man with a musket in his hand, and the next second
she was behind this tent looking out at a group of men and women in ragged clothes, the
dust-choked scarves that shielded their mouths while riding now pushed down around
their necks.

Kaawa gritted her teeth and shook her head, hard. She could not let her memories
get away from her, not here, not now. The bandits before her talked and laughed amongst
themselves, their words like thunder, the canteen glinting in the firelight as it was passed
around the circle. A tall, broad-shouldered woman took a swig and offered it to the
person beside her, who declined. That person was only a huddled form facing away from
Kaawa, but she threw a breeze out to retrieve an image. Sure enough, it was Jarli. His
dark cheeks were stained red by the fire, and his eyes kept darting to the spaces between
his captors. For a split second his eyes were Ellin’s, bloodshot and shining with hope.

Kaawa’s hand convulsed, and she lost her grip on the breeze. The image fled. She
took a deep breath, trying to force her mind to untangle the problem of removing the boy
without alerting the entire bandit camp.

Then a dog started barking.

Kaawa spun around. A large mutt stood several feet away, baring its teeth. Kaawa
cursed herself as the group at the campfire surged towards her. Maybe she was just a
weak old woman after all, if she managed to forget that her breezes would carry her scent
downwind.

A gunshot rang out; a bullet flew past. Her hair stirred gently with the air of its
passage. Kaawa tried to collect her thoughts, but dust swamped her vision, dust and
memories. The sneering man reared up again, demanding that she give him the money.
The money or her lover, which would it be?
And she had sneered right back. If they hurt Ellin, they would never make it out alive, she boasted, though she had never killed anyone before. But surely she could, if it was to save Ellin. Looking at her bruised eye, Kaawa had half a mind to do it anyway.

A couple of shots rang out, aimed at her feet. They were clearly meant to be a warning, but she flung an arm out, whipping up a wind that flicked the bullets away like flies. The band, men and women alike, blanched, many hands grabbing for their guns, fumbling with holsters and straps. Twenty hardened road bandits stood before her, and Kaawa gave them all a triumphant smile.

“‘I’m warning you!’” The words reached her ears while her mind grappled with a larger wind, a sturdy rope that she would use to seize Ellin and jerk her out of that bastard’s arms. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Ellin thrashing around, attempting to struggle from her awkward position over the horse. Her eyes shone with an equal measure of hope and fear. She was shouting something, but the wind carried the sound away.

Kaawa hurled her rope. It plunged through the bandits like a snake, making clothing flap and bullets veer wildly off-course. The winds whipped around Ellin and rebounded towards Kaawa, finally carrying back Ellin’s words. “Hurry!”

Then, overlying Ellin’s voice, came the sound of a gunshot.

Ellin shot forward, into the safety of Kaawa’s winds. She slumped into Kaawa’s arms, boneless and reeling. Kaawa cupped her head, and found it sticky, wet. Then she saw the hole in her temple. It was so close, just a few inches away, but Kaawa felt like she was seeing it from above. It was only a sinkhole, a barren well, surely not a hole
through the most vital part of Kaawa’s life. But Ellin didn’t stir. Though the wind
screamed, and the bandits cursed, and the bullets rang in all directions, Ellin never stirred.

Now the air held bullets again. As Kaawa stood frozen another bandit fired, and a
hot line was drawn against the meat of her thigh. “Hurry!” Ellin’s voice echoed in her
mind still. Or should that be always? When had Ellin ever really left her?

“Hurry!” Ellin called again, the past, for once, drawing her back to the present.
There was the boy, huddled against a nearby tent, eyes closed, arms over his head.

Smart child. But he needn’t worry. Kaawa called wind after wind, more than she
had ever summoned before. She didn’t weave ropes or platforms now, but waves,
sweeping the bandits aside like debris from a beach. She leapt forward and grabbed Jarli.
He was warm, fresh from the fire, and grabbed her arms as she pulled him to her chest.
She almost laughed with relief as she swung her winds downward, and ran, fleet as a girl,
into the sky.

* * *

“This is amazing.”

Kaawa looked down at Jarli, who had spoken in a whisper. They walked arm-in-
arm through the sky, the desert laid out before them. The sun was almost down now, and
land’s sienna and umber had cooled to blue and black.

“It is quite amazing, isn’t it?” she said. “Everything’s different from above.”
Jarli nodded. He looked out into the distance, where the town was emerging as a bright, lamp-lit spot on the horizon. He sighed. “I wish I could just stay up here for a while.”

Kaawa glanced down at him. “You’re mother’s worried sick, you know.”

Guilt flashed across his face. “Yes, of course,” he said. “I suppose you should set me down in the town square, so that I can get to her quickest.” He looked down at the tapestry below them and started tracing ridges and dry streambeds with his fingers.

“Thanks,” he said.

Kaawa could barely hear him over the wind.

“Don’t mention it,” she said. “I’m…happy that I did this. Not happy that it happened, mind you. Happy that you’re all right.” And happy that she was all right as well. Better than all right. Better than she had been in a long time.

Jarli didn’t say anything in reply. But Kaawa thought that he looked happier as they started to descend.

When they reached the town, Kaawa did as he asked and aimed for the square. There was a crowd gathered there already. Kaawa and Jarli alighted in front of them, stepping out of the sky as though walking down a spiral staircase. By the time the two reached the last step, the muffled thump of their feet hitting the ground sounded as loud as a trumpet’s call. The crowd was utterly silent.

All the staring was making Kaawa nervous. She watched as the townspeople soaked in this sweeping display of magic, the kind she hadn’t shown them in years and years. A few hands tightened on weapons, and Kaawa briefly wondered if she would be escaping yet another mob today.
A voice came from beside her. “It’s fine,” Jarli said, coming forward to stand in front of Kaawa. He spoke in a loud, carrying voice. “She saved me from the bandits. Now they’re gone, and news of the rescue will spread. They won’t be coming back here for a while!”

Kaawa noted, with bemusement, that Jarli’s confidence seemed to grow once he took his place before the crowd. Sure enough, several people brightened at his words, and the looks that they threw at Kaawa were no longer hostile. This was a child who knew how to make adults listen.

“Does anyone know where my mother is?” Jarli asked.

The crowd surged forward then, eager to return the boy to his family. Kaawa decided it was time that she headed home as well and walked towards a nearby side street. She heard glad cries behind her and felt a wave of relief when people turned away to gawk at the happy reunion. The side street she entered was almost deserted, free of life except for an old dog dozing in a doorway. Even the windows were empty.

“Wait!”

Kaawa turned to find Jarli running after her.

“You can’t leave yet,” Jarli said, panting. “My parents will want to thank you.”

“They can send a fruit basket or something,” Kaawa said. “I still don’t like your family, and I don’t feel up to seeing them right now. It’s been a long day.”

Jarli swallowed hard. “What about me?”

“What about you?”

“Can I…” All of the boy’s former confidence drained out of him. His eyes dropped from her own, and he stared fixedly at her left shoulder. “Can I come see you?”
Kaawa shifted on her feet, considering him. “Do you still think that magic can solve your problems?”

“No,” he said, his expression serious. “But I still think it’s knowledge worth having.”

She considered him for a moment. “You just want to fly, don’t you?”

His grin nearly split his face. “Of course I want to fly! That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. And the way you flung those bandits away like ragdolls!” His eyes danced as he savored the memory. “Please let me come. I’ll help with the sheep. I’ll help with the carding. Anything!”

Kaawa was a little taken aback by his exuberance. In spite of everything, amusement bubbled up inside her and she almost cracked a smile.

He still reminded her of Ellin in some ways. But looking at him no longer conjured up sharp, searing memories to burn her. To remind her of her failure.

Tears filled her eyes, and she had to blink hard against them. She was not going to cry in front of the boy. That would be ridiculous.

“Fine,” she heard herself say.

Jarli, who had begun to droop under her scrutiny, jerked in surprise. “Fine?”

“Fine,” she said. “You’re the one who has to convince your folks though. I’m not having a stampede of scandalized Ngondes showing up at my house.”

“Don’t worry,” Jarli assured her. “I’ll convince them.”

“I suppose you will,” Kaawa said drily.

It was full dark now, but lamplight from a nearby window illuminated his smile. He looked bright, buoyant, and very much alive.
To her surprise, she found herself smiling back. Waving in farewell, she turned homeward and spun herself a breeze. The night seemed almost gentle as the wind opened its arms and swept her up into its embrace.
Vita

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