

Arcana

Stories of Magic and Life

An honors thesis for the Department of English.

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A Note on Story Titles

The titles of the stories in this collection – and, indeed, the title of the collection itself – are taken from the Major Arcana of the Tarot deck. Though today, most people associate Tarot with fortune telling and the occult, it actually began as a deck used in various card games across Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries. It was this sense of having a foot in both the magical and the real worlds that inspired me to use the cards of the Major Arcana to unify my somewhat disparate stories of people and magic. After all, a Tarot reading ties the real struggles that people face together with a somewhat magical approach to finding answers, not unlike these stories.

Each card has an individual meaning and I sought to find those cards which best fit my stories. The italicized definitions which follow each story title are taken directly from Barbara Moore's *The Steampunk Tarot Manual*, which was helpful throughout this process for understanding both the cards individually and the reading of Tarot as an art.

The Hierophant

Living faith in everyday life.

My mother takes my hand and leads me up to the old bearded man. She tells me not to be afraid and not to blink because, if I look away, I won't see his magic trick. I'm not sure what to expect. We've made the circuit of the whole park, weaving through tents and between the big old trees, visiting all sorts of people, from the woman who told my mother's fortune to the man who swallowed seven knives whole and then breathed fire. We skipped this old man the first time around, despite my mother's insistence that I had nothing to be afraid of. To me, though, there was just something too unnerving about him and his wispy grey beard and his unnaturally blue eyes. But he's the only wizard in the park and my mother insists that I'll regret it if I don't go up to him. She lets go of my hand and nudges me forward.

I keep my eyes on the ground as he asks, "Well, Iddy, what sort of magic would you like to see?" I don't even notice that he knows my name. When I do meet those blue eyes, they're kind but it seems like they've seen more years than any person should.

I can't think of an answer so I stay silent. In response, he reaches forward and pulls a foreign-looking coin from out behind my ear before making it disappear in a colorful puff of smoke and sparks. I watch in awe, trying to decide whether or not this is all a show. When the fortune teller frightened me with her talk of spirits and future occurrences, my mother assured me that it's all good fun but, in the end, it's only pretend. Watching the sparks and the smoke dance around the old man's fingers, I'm not so sure.

The sparks stop suddenly and I wrack my brain for something wonderful for him to do. Something to prove that this is real. Or not.

“Can you make all of the bad things disappear?” I ask. I know it isn’t a reasonable request but I also know that I’ve been wandering around this park with my mother so that I won’t be at home to see my father packing up his things, getting in his car, and driving away.

The wizard shakes his head sadly. “No one can do that, Ibbby.”

I look back at my mother who’s currently chatting away with some other patron of the fair. She looks sad and tired, though she’s spent the whole day trying to hide it. I want to show her that there’s magic in the world. I want to make her happy again.

I lean forward and whisper in the old man’s ear. When I step back again, he’s smiling, as if he’s been waiting for my request all afternoon. Maybe all month. I run back and grab my mother’s hand, pulling her forward. She laughs, repeatedly asking me what this is all about.

The wizard leans forward in his chair. “Now don’t blink, either one of you,” he says. “You don’t want to miss the magic.” He winks at me and smiles at my mother. “It’s all real, you know.”

I open my eyes as wide as they’ll go and wait for it to begin.

Temperance

The right thing at the right time in the right place.

I lean on the counter and shuffle the cards aimlessly. I picked them up from a table near the back of the shop a few days ago while I was dusting and I haven't quite managed to stop playing with them since. They're old – I can tell from the worn and bent edges, sure, but more from the way they feel – though so is everything in this store, so that's not a surprise. They're an old design too, but not one I recognize. My fingers itch to lay them out and do a reading – for myself, for my boss, for the security guard at the jewelry store down the street, it doesn't really matter – but I keep my hands occupied with the shuffling. No readings. No trying to see the future. No anything even vaguely related to magic.

The bell on the door tinkles and I look up from the cards passing through my moving hands. The sunlight coming through the front windows and hitting the various polished pieces of fancy old junk that we sell here forces me to squint to see who's come in. The man standing in the doorway isn't a customer I've seen before. Not that we don't get people who aren't regulars but this guy doesn't exactly look like the kind of person who plans to shell out thousands of dollars for an antique hand-carved wooden chest or even a few dozen for a tiny antique hand mirror. He's tallish and can't be any more than eight or ten years older than I am, for all that his narrow face has lines and his brown hair streaks of grey. His rail-thin body and shabby, baggy clothes give him the unmistakable aura of someone whose whole life has been one big rough patch. The urge to take a peek, poke around his memory for some clue about his past hits me hard. It would only take an accidental brush of our hands, easily achieved by knocking into him. Instead I look back down at my cards and name each one silently in my head until he's standing right in front of the counter and I have no choice but to look up again.

“Shuffle any faster and you could probably make it in Vegas.” His voice isn’t the low, hoarse, growl-like sound I was expecting but rather a cheerful baritone. I snap the deck down on the counter and meet his eyes. They’re grey.

“How can I help you?” Without the cards to distract me, I’m finding it harder to quell the urge to invade his mental privacy. Looking him right in the eye isn’t helping.

Weirdly enough, I can feel him sizing me up, too. Not, obviously, the way I’d really like to examine him, but still closely enough that I feel uncomfortable. His concentration – and maybe his interest – breaks, though, when he answers my question. “I’m looking for Bob Adrian. He, uh...told me to drop by when I got a chance.”

I gesture towards the door that leads to the back stockroom. “He’ll be somewhere in there.”

He walks away in the indicated direction and I pick up the cards once more, watching them slide by in my hands as I again start to shuffle. I keep my focus on them because I’m sure that if I let my mind wander, I’ll start to eavesdrop and even accidentally doing magic will lead to nothing good.

I take a brief second to weigh this thought in my mind. No, nothing good usually comes of violating a stranger’s privacy, but the actual act of doing magic... Sometimes I can’t help but wonder if abstaining all these months has had any real effect, other than to make me cranky about waiting for water to boil. In my months working here at Adrian Antiques, I’ve seen so many opportunities to just clear away some dust or fix a broken piece of furniture – harmless little things that would take hardly any power at all. And yet, here I stand, shuffling Tarot cards because I won’t let myself do any actual magic. It’s frustrating. But the reasonable – and not whiny – part of me knows it’s for the best.

After five or so minutes, Bob and the stranger come out together, disturbing my quiet but conflicted thoughts. I set the cards down and turn to the pair of men when my boss clears his throat.

“Nora,” he says, his hands tucked into the pockets of his jeans, a smile on his face, “this is Will Hendry. I’m taking him on to help with pick ups and stocking. Will, this is Nora Taylor, my shop assistant. She’s been with me almost six months now so if you find yourself with any questions, she’s probably got the answers.”

Despite my desire to poke around in Will’s memories, I keep my hands resting on the counter instead of holding one out for a handshake. I do, however, give him my most welcoming smile, taking the opportunity to really examine his face. There’s a small white scar running along his left cheekbone and I find that the combination of the tired-looking lines and dark circles and the lively grey eyes just doesn’t seem to make sense. “Welcome to the party.”

A few minutes later, Will is gone and Bob has returned to whatever he was up to in the backroom. I’ve begun to shuffle again and, absentmindedly, I lay down a card, face up. I look down once I realize what I’ve done and see the Two of Cups. A new partnership, possibly a romantic one. I sigh in disgust and slap the rest of the deck down on top of the lone card then push them all aside.

I tell myself that it means nothing. A random card drop with absolutely no intent behind it. Certainly not a reading. And anyway, if there’s any modicum of truth in it, it’s only because Bob’s taken on a new hire. A new partner for me to work with. But since I wasn’t doing a reading, there’s no meaning in the card at all. None.

I push the deck into the farthest corner behind the cash register and leave it there while I handle the few customers that trickle in and dust some of the pieces near the back of the shop. I only pick the cards up again to return them to their original display table. Next time I need

something to play with, I'll stick to a poker deck. Or some Cat's Cradle string. No more items with even the vaguest of magical connotations. Clearly, it's too much of a temptation, and obviously, I can't even handle that.

I turn the sign to "Closed" and lock up the front door before heading to my car, making every effort to force the Two of Cups from my mind.

My fingers prickle with the purple static-like bursts that spark between them, but the meager light they give off does nothing to disturb the darkness I'm in. Every so often, I think I hear something move and so I lash out, the magic burning against my eyes like a lightning strike. Then I feel hands around my neck and I'm screaming...

And then I'm awake, safely in my bed, though feeling stifled by my covers. I kick them off and grope for the bottle of water I keep on my nightstand. My hand brushes against things as I search and I hear the familiar thunks of my box of tissues then my chapstick hitting the floor. I'll have to rescue them in the morning before they get devoured by the mess under my bed.

The water helps some and I settle back into my pillows, closing my eyes as I do. Against the dark screen of my eyelids, I see the barrel of a gun, pointed at my face. Not a nightmare this time, but a memory. I open my eyes again and stare up at the darkened ceiling above my head. Sleep feels very far away.

My first real interaction with Will comes during an overtime shift a few days after he starts work. Bob has departed and banished the two of us to the book room – named such as it's, rather obviously, the part of the backroom which houses books not yet or unlikely to ever be on sale. We sort through several boxes of new acquisitions, dividing them onto bookshelves labeled "TO BE SOLD", "QUESTIONABLE", and "UNLIKELY." After four similar shifts over the previous six

months, I've got a pretty good idea of what should go where and I know that Bob trusts my judgment. I would have been fine handling the task on my own but Bob insisted upon creating an opportunity for Will and I to get to know each other. And so, Will unpacks the boxes and hands me the books to organize as I see fit. We chat about nothing to avoid working in awkward silence – exactly the kind of conversation that I'm worst at – and occasionally, he tries to sneak in some sort of real question. I give him short, unhelpful answers about how I met Bob – old family friend – where I went to school – Boston – if I'm from LA originally – yup – and so on. He takes each of my coarse replies with what I'm beginning to realize is a mostly permanent cheerful smile. It, like his voice, seems oddly incongruous with his physical appearance.

And then he leans forward to hand me the next stack of books more quickly than I anticipated and our hands brush, skin to skin. My vision goes black and I feel myself sinking to the floor as my legs give out.

Reading a person is an experience only as pleasant as his or her memories and, in Will's case, it is painful as hell. For all my curiosity when he'd first walked in, I hadn't expected this. The memories flash by and I live each of them:

I am Will as a child getting punched and kicked for mouthing off to a group of older boys. I feel each punch sink into my stomach, my ribs, my face, and try to curl more tightly into a ball. Shouts ask me if I'm sorry now. I am, but I would never admit it.

I am Will going to bed hungry when his mother has to pick paying rent over grocery shopping. I can hear her crying in the kitchen and I feel guilty. I want to tell her that she is not a failure as a mother, but do not know how.

I am Will inhaling cigarette smoke for the first time and I feel the danger of it, even as my lungs burn and my eyes water. I hold in a cough and nod enthusiastically when the older boys ask me what I think.

I am Will shooting heroin into his arm for the tenth, fifteenth, fiftieth time, each time quashing the small part of my mind that begs me not to do this, not again. I feel the needle slide under my skin and breathlessly await the way the world will seem so much less troubling.

I am Will huddling in a sleeping bag in the back of the van that is also his home, shaking with withdrawal. I battle between a desperate willingness to do anything to get my next fix and a refusal to do harm to anyone but myself.

And finally I am Will as he cries in his mother's arms and promises that he will get clean because he can't go on feeling like this. I feel the relief that the tears bring and the comfort of a hand on my back, feeling for the first time in years that everything will be alright.

I come back to myself and find that I'm looking right into Will's grey eyes. They're worried, as is the frown that causes a small crease to appear between his eyebrows. At some point, he's put a hand on my forehead, as if to check for a fever. His long fingers feel cool against my skin. Good thing that it's only first contact that causes me to absorb a person's memories. I'd be thoroughly against having to go through that a second time.

"Nora?" It's a tentative question, like he's not actually sure if I'm really alive or something. "You okay? Do you, uh, pass out often? Is there someone I should call?"

My brain understands the questions but it's still somewhat overwhelmed so instead of an answer, it comes up with, "Heroin?"

Will's eyes narrow and the forehead crease deepens. "What?" I can tell that he's torn between wondering how the hell I could know something like that and thinking that he may have misheard me.

In its infinite wisdom, my brain chooses to press on rather than strategically backtrack. "You used to do heroin. And you lived in your van." Yes, I am indeed a master of defusing awkward situations.

Up to this point, Will's been crouching over me, but now he kind of falls backwards until he's in a seated position. He stares at me. There are so many emotions fighting for supremacy on his face that I doubt even he knows how he's feeling. "How the hell did you know that?" On the upside, he doesn't sound angry.

By now, my brain's back to full working capacity and I find myself at a crossroads. I could fudge the answer and hope that saying Bob told me would be an adequate lie. Or, I could tell him the entire crazy truth. I remember the Two of Cups from the week before. Something tells me that this is an occasion for truth-telling.

"When you touched my hand," I say, mentally crossing my fingers in the fervent hope that I don't fuck this up, "the skin-on-skin contact made me, well, I accidentally read you. Which basically means that all your memories got shoved into my brain." I can see that the poor guy doesn't really know how to take this and that makes me talk faster. "I didn't mean to – honestly. It's not something I actually control. It just happens the first time I touch someone – and obviously some people's memories are harder to deal with than others – but I swear, I'll never tell anyone what I saw. I'm good at forgetting other people's shit." I bite my lip, not really sure if I should say more.

Will swallows. "You saw everything? I mean, you're not just bullshitting me after having had a seizure and accidentally spitting out something Bob shouldn't have told you? Because I'd honestly prefer the second option, I think."

So I tell him what I saw. I list out all the memories I was pulled through until he finally holds up a hand and says, "Please, just...just stop. I get it." It's the first time I've seen him frown.

We sit in an awkward silence for a few minutes. My mouth is dry and I feel a headache coming on but getting up to get water or Advil doesn't really seem like an appropriate thing to do at the moment.

I'm not entirely used to finding myself in this situation. Usually, I don't pass out when I read a person – that would be a major issue in public places – and so I hardly ever have to explain myself. I even less frequently tell the truth.

“Is it like a psychic thing?” While I've been mulling over past experiences, Will's clearly been pondering the conundrum I've presented him. “I mean, it's kind of like mind reading, right?” He pauses again. “You're really not bullshitting me?”

I shake my head. “I don't know what it is. My mom has it, and her mom, and my —” I stop and make a split second decision. “It's what led my sister to kill herself. For her, it was any time she touched another person, not just the first time. It was too much for her to deal with.” The words come out quickly and I direct them all towards the floor. Sharing bits of my past is one thing, but having to look at Will's face while I do is entirely another.

That revelation seems to stun Will somewhat and, when I do look up, he seems to be lost in his own mind, though whether mulling over my words or his past, I don't know. I take the opportunity to pull myself off the floor with the help of the surrounding bookshelves. Things have gotten a little personal for my taste and I decide it's time to plead sick and leave. Which is exactly what I do. I leave a still-bewildered Will to lock up and head for my car, thinking that, if the post-reading nausea passes, maybe I'll pick up a slice of cheesecake for dessert from the bakery near my apartment.

I wasn't lying to Will when I told him that I'm good at forgetting other people's shit. By the time I get home, cheesecake in tow, most of the specifics from his memories have faded. The main

facts are still there though, and I ponder them as I throw together a bowl of pasta and veggies for dinner. My curiosity is certainly satisfied.

Exhausted as I am, I practically fall asleep over dinner. I only just manage to wash up my dishes and drag myself through the shower and a toothbrush across my teeth before practically passing out in bed. Even the easiest forays into people's memories tend to leave me drained for a day or so. As I fall asleep, I make a mental note to leave time in the morning to grab coffee on the way to work.

My dreams are a bizarre jumble of residual Will memories and my own buried ones. My increasingly less recent exploits in Boston intertwine with bits and pieces of Will's past. When I wake up in the morning, I feel almost more exhausted than when I went to bed.

I roll into work just on time with a triple-shot mocha, guaranteed to make me jumpy as hell but probably worth the upside of staying awake at the counter. The few patrons who ask about the pricing of this antique nightstand or that framed Ouija Board don't seem too bothered by my slightly stumbling sped-up speech or the fact that my hands are shaking as I gesticulate a little too excitedly.

My only interaction with Will comes when he *does* notice these things and asks if I'm alright. I don't meet his eyes when I tell him that I'm absolutely fine, nothing to worry about, just had a little too much coffee. As he returns to sorting things in the backroom, I can't help but wonder if I've revealed too much of myself. I spend the rest of the day uncomfortably feeling like he's studying me or trying to figure me out. I practically run out the door as soon as my shift is over.

Another week passes without excitement or incident. Bob sends Will out to explore a few estate sales and the things he brings back – a couple of vases and some furniture, plus one giant, ornate,

full-length mirror – seem to get purchased as soon as we put them on display. Bob is, understandably, thrilled and sends my coworker out on more acquisition ventures, leaving me, often as not, blissfully alone in the shop.

I close my third sale of the day and lean tiredly against the counter as soon as the customer closes the front door on her way out. Ever since my accidental run-in with Will's memories, sleep has been even harder to find, with nearly every attempt being interrupted by some combination of nightmares, my memories, and Will, not just the residual traces of his past but also sometimes him asking me questions and prying into my past, though whether he is friendly or antagonistic tends to vary from night to night. Regardless, I wake up each morning feeling like I haven't slept at all.

On a whim, I retrieve the Tarot cards I was playing with way back on the day I first met Will. They're still on their little table in the back of the shop, now covered in a thin film of dust. I shuffle them as I return to my post at the front of the store.

I can't even remember the last time I did a Tarot reading for myself, or even the last time I really did a reading at all. It's the kind of thing I grew up around, what with my mother and grandmother both telling fortunes for extra money and leaving spare decks all around the house. And my dad, even though he found the whole thing kind of silly, encouraged me to at least learn how to read the cards, if only as a way to carry on the tradition and channel my other energies.

I shuffle them one more time then cut the deck into three piles before stacking them back up. I go simple. Three cards, each placed face up in front of me. The first, the Eight of Cups, represents my past: leaving a situation in search of something else. Accurate, I guess, if running across a country to hide could be interpreted as "leaving in search of something else." The second card, the Emperor, is my present, my quest for order and stability amid chaos and turmoil. And finally the third card, embodying my future. It's the Two of Cups again. I can't

help but think of Will, though this time the card feels like it carries more weight than the first time I laid it down.

I replace the three cards face-down on the top of the deck and push them aside, frowning a little. Past, present, future. Running, fixing, partnership. The possible implications of the final card both terrify and intrigue me.

The bell tinkles and I go back to work.

The following Sunday finds Will and I organizing the backroom in preparation for some new pieces Bob is sending along from the antiques convention he's attending in Palm Springs. We keep things quiet and for most of the morning, the only sounds are some music coming from the radio in Bob's office and our occasional "Oh, could you just hand me..." or "Give me a hand with...". I physically jump when he says, "It seems somewhat unfair that you get to know so much about me but the only thing I know about you is that, apparently, you're psychic."

I'm about to protest but it occurs to me that the man's got a point and, besides, I don't need to tell him everything, just enough. Maybe if I answer a few questions, he'll stop constantly looking at me like I'm hiding something. I sit down on the claw-footed armchair I'd been attempting to move. "Okay, fine. What do you want to know?"

He too sits down on the nearest piece of over-stuffed furniture. "How'd you end up here?"

I resist the urge to ask him if he means "here" as in the store or "here" in the larger existential sense. "I was living in Boston after school and I ended up getting involved with the wrong people, did some of the wrong things, and then it got too crazy and I ran. Packed up my car and left. I grew up here in LA, so I came back, figuring that at least I'd know my way around. And Bob, well, his son and my dad were really good friends until Michael – the son –

got killed in the Gulf War but Bob and my dad stayed close, so I figured he'd offer me a job if I needed it. And I like old things. So the job he had for me worked out well."

"He's good like that," Will murmurs. He smiles a little. "If I ask you what kind of trouble, will you tell me?"

I think about it and am on the brink of deciding that maybe, yes, I think I will, when we hear the unmistakable beeping of a delivery truck backing in. Will gives me another smile, as if to say, "Saved by the bell!" and goes to greet the truck. I take a breath and follow.

Most of what Bob has sent us is easy to unload and, with the help of the guy driving the truck, we make short work of getting all the various boxes, chairs, and decorative end tables into the backroom. The only thing that takes two of us is a sizable old grandfather clock that Will and I manage to wheel in on a dolly as the truck drives away.

The clock is heavy but we have things pretty well under control until Will loses his footing on a rug and falls back, bringing the clock with him. I don't think. I act.

For a second, the clock is suspended, shimmering a staticky purple, and then it resets itself upright on the dolly. For the second time in as many weeks, I pass out.

This time I don't see anything until I come to and once again find myself looking right into Will's eyes. Somehow I've ended up horizontal on the couch in Bob's office. Will sits in the desk chair and stares at me with a mixture of concern and, oh I really hope that isn't fear. I consider breaking eye contact and buying time by shifting into a seated position but I do neither. We hold each other's eyes in silence for another minute or so. Then Will speaks.

"What you did... What you did back there with the clock. Was that..." I can tell that he's not sure he wants to make the leap, say the word. "Was that magic?"

"Yes."

He takes this in, mulls it over, and exhales sharply. "Shit."

It suddenly feels like too much to keep looking into those grey eyes. I look down at the fabric of the couch as if I'm studying the red and blue pattern to memorize it and then push myself up into a more vertical position, ignoring the dull pounding in my head.

“You were addicted.” He says it with complete certainty and when I look up, I see that his eyes are still trained on me. “An addict can usual spot another addict,” he says with a small shrug, clearly responding to the shocked expression on my face. The action doesn't quite fit with the look on his face. There's definitely a little fear there, but there's something else, too.

“Yes.” And then it all comes spilling out. “My dad always taught me to save magic for the big things. The things I couldn't do any other way. It's hard – magic wants to be used. And when I was in Boston, I met this guy. This group, really. Small time thieves looking to make it bigger. And they wanted someone who could do magic to help them out. Dane – the guy – told me that my magic was a gift and I shouldn't be keeping it bottled up. I guess that was sort of what I'd been wanting to hear my whole life because I didn't need very much convincing. And it wasn't long before I was using it for everything: boiling water, doing my hair, finding my keys, whatever. Plus all the stuff I was doing for Dane. For the group, I mean. I helped them shut off security systems, mostly, but once I teleported two of them into a locked bank vault and...” I trail off, temporarily lost in my own memories.

“Anyway,” I continue, shaking myself back into the present, “eventually we went bigger than we should have and a security guard got shot and killed. I panicked and called for an ambulance – which, of course, brought the cops. Most of the group got arrested. Dane got away. Paid me a visit in my apartment a day later and waved a gun in my face.” I can see it like it's right in front of me and I feel the same boiling fury I felt then. I take a deep breath, reminding myself that I'm 3,000 miles and six months away from that man. “I lost control.

Nearly killed him. The next day, I packed up my car and started driving west. Promised myself that I wouldn't do any more magic. Not for anything."

"And how'd that work out for you?" Will isn't mocking me – I can tell from his tone – but he also sounds skeptical. And rightly so.

I bite my lip, trying to figure out how to explain. "You don't get addicted to magic unless you start using it for everything. Then you come to rely on the, I don't know, the convenience of it. And what you don't notice is the way that doing that, you give away little pieces of yourself. Your body doesn't have a chance to reset itself like it needs to. And then you get to the point where, if you aren't using it, it feels like it's burning you from the inside out. Like pressure building up." I look down at my hands, half expecting to see them sparking. "I don't know what happens now."

The desk chair scrapes the floor and Will is suddenly next to me on the couch. "You relapsed. It happens. And, considering that you saved me from death by grandfather clock, I'm fairly glad you did." He looks down at his hands and then back up at me. "I can be here for you. Let me."

For a moment, we hold each other's eyes. I understand now why Will was constantly staring at me, trying to figure out what I was hiding. And I can see the fight going on inside his head as he desperately tries to conflate what he just saw with everything he's known about the world up to this point. But more than that, I can tell that he's absolutely telling the truth – he wants to help me. For a moment, I bask in that feeling, fully embracing the idea that there is someone who wants to help me recover.

Of course, then I panic. I mumble something even I don't understand before barricading myself in the tiny washroom off Bob's office. I stay there until I think I hear Will leave the room and then allow another few minutes more before opening the door.

Will has indeed departed but there's a note on the desk chair. As I pick it up, my mind generates a dozen possible messages that it might contain. But all it says is this:

Nora-

Gone to get lunch. Take the rest of the day off and feel better. Call me if you need anything.

- Will

His number is scrawled under his name.

I fold the note up and put it in the pocket of my sweater and, lacking any other plans of action, follow his advice and go home.

I feel like I'm burning from the inside out. It's certainly got nothing to do with the weather – 50° and cloudy – or the temperature of my apartment – hardly over 65°. Still, I strip down until I'm lying on my bed in the dark in nothing but a tank top and underwear. I keep my eyes closed, certain that if I open them, I'll see those tell-tale purple sparks. I squeeze my eyes tighter and try desperately to lull myself to sleep.

When that fails, I sit up and grope for both my phone and the folded up piece of paper I placed on my nightstand when I got home. Once again, I hear the familiar roll and thunk of my chapstick hitting the floor, followed by the hollow thud of the tissue box.

Using the light from my phone, I decipher Will's number and dial it. It's 2:46 am. I hope he doesn't mind.

He answers on the third ring, one before I would have given up. "Hello?" He sounds like I've woken him. "Nora?"

"Yes." I feel small, like a child afraid of the monster underneath the bed. My mother used to have a fake spell to get rid of any scary things hiding in my bedroom. She swore that it worked every time. Except this time, the monster's inside me and entirely real, rather than a

figment of my imagination. “You said to call if I needed anything and I just... It’s like I’ve let the cap off and now I can’t...” I’m having trouble articulating why exactly I want Will to be here right at this moment but he seems to understand well enough.

“Give me your address. I can come over right now.”

I rattle it off and hang up the phone, hoping he’ll hurry because it really does feel like the magic is boiling under my skin.

I sit there in the dark and wait for him to knock.

The Star

Guidance, serenity, and hope.

The little old witch pattered along the street towards her shop. She'd had to nip out for some ingredients for her dinner and now it was somewhat late. The streets were almost deserted as she moved slowly along, her long coat whispering softly on the cobbles, her grey hair escaping from its bun and waving gently in the light breeze. She did indulge herself with a brief pause in front of her favorite hat shop, though. Everything in there was far too expensive for her but there were some glorious hats, made of silk or satin or the finest quality wool, decorated with feathers and ribbons and gems. She thought that, maybe someday, she would throw caution to the wind and spend all her savings on one. It was hardly as though she had anyone to inherit the money after she died.

With a small smile, she turned from the shop window and continued along her way, stopping again only when she was outside her own storefront which was nothing but a little purple door and a window tucked in between a bicycle shop and an ice cream parlor. Fading letters in the window declared "SPELLS SOLD HERE – LOVE, SUCCESS, REVENGE." The witch had to dig around in her purse to find the key but once she was inside, she felt that familiar feeling of home wash over her.

The shop was tiny by comparison with others in the area and it always smelled somewhat musty, like incense that had been burned quite some time ago. As usual, the cat was asleep on top of one of the many low bookshelves that ran along the walls of the room. The books were all leather-bound and archaic-looking but hardly any of them held anything of value. In fact, most of the items around the room were meant more for decoration than practical use, including the human skull and the crystal ball in its ornate stand. The only real things of value in the shop were kept along the back wall, behind the table where she met with those few people who

happened to wander in. And the witch knew that the herbs and talismans were only valuable to those who knew what to do with them.

She surveyed the room and decided it was time to close for the night, take the cat, and go upstairs to the tiny apartment in which she lived, but her plans were derailed by the arrival of a young woman, who, while not in hysterics, certainly gave off the aura of being right on the brink of a breakdown. Her face was covered in red blotches and her eyes were puffy in a way that indicated that she had recently cried until she was out of tears. Her hair, long and bottle-blond, hung lankly and stuck in a few spots to her damp cheeks. All in all, she made for a pitiable sight and the old woman could not help but feel a desire to help this poor creature. Without any direction, the young woman sat down in the client chair and looked expectantly up at the shop's proprietor, tears once again beginning to pool in the corners of her eyes.

The witch listened silently as the young woman told her tale of woe. She spoke of the man she had loved, had given the past three years of her life to, had anticipated marrying in a year or so. Her family had adored him and his had been just as affectionate towards her. They shared a love for French food and for dogs and both wanted to have three children. He had, the woman insisted, always been kind and caring and romantic and their lives had fitted together perfectly. There had been nothing wrong. Really, it had seemed only a matter of time before he proposed. Instead, he had suddenly decided that she was no longer what he wanted in life and promptly moved out of the apartment they had shared together, taking all of his things and leaving behind everything they had bought together as a couple. By the time she finished her story, the young woman was crying in earnest. She buried her face in her hands and began to sob.

The few clients that the witch managed to draw in usually told the same kinds of stories. They had lost love and they wanted it back. Or they wanted their former lover to suffer.

Occasionally, they wanted to lose weight or get rich so that their exes would feel the sting of what they had given up. The witch often wondered if the only people interested in what she had to offer were the shallow and the self-absorbed.

Yet this young woman's story – or rather, the way she told it with her tears and the cracks in her voice – spoke of real pain, deeper than most of what the witch encountered. She seemed truly baffled by this sad turn of events and, once the sobs subsided, asked simply for a way to win her boyfriend back and to bring him home again. The witch nodded, handed her a Kleenex, and gave a kindly smile, then turned to examine the objects along her back wall.

She would never explain her organizational system to anyone for it would expose the fact that she too often used her own judgment when dealing with clients' problems. To her left were talismans made of random junk she had collected and polished before hanging it from chains so that they could be easily worn. Not a single one of these did anything, nor did the supposed activation spells that went with them. Directly in front of her hung an array of herbs and spices. These contained the real power, when paired with a spell of course. Off to the right were empty lockets, boxes, and small pouches to hold the herbs.

The witch found herself torn. The young woman clearly wanted her man back and the witch knew that such magic, while difficult, was certainly within her own abilities. But why would anyone, the witch wondered, want the return of someone who had so clearly abandoned them? That seemed nearly as ridiculous as the very willingness to entrust one's happiness to another at all. She tutted softly to herself as she pondered her options then, after a minute or so, pulled a few springs of various herbs – thyme and False Solomon's Seal, among others – out of their bunches. Dry as they were, they powdered up easily onto the small slip of yellow cloth which she then pinched into a bundle and lowered into a little silver box. She picked up one of the small pieces of paper on the edge of the table and, in a neat, firm hand, wrote out the

appropriate spell. Said every night before bed, she instructed her client, the spell should take effect in approximately two weeks. The box should be kept under her pillow.

A smile broke out on the young woman's face and remained there as she dug the appropriate amount of cash out of her wallet. Her steps seemed slightly lighter as she exited the shop and walked off into the darkness.

The little old witch watched her go, tucking the money away into a secret compartment in the table. She would put it away more securely in the morning. For now, all that was left was to actually shut up the shop and go upstairs.

Later that evening, after she had finished her dinner and settled on the sofa with the cat in her lap, the little old witch smiled, knowing that, come two weeks, that young woman would hardly remember the man who had left her.

The Moon

A situation of flux and uncertainty, fraught either with deception or the revealing of important truths.

Harmony

I go out to play as soon as Mama says I can. She makes me promise to be back by sunset and to bring enough heather to fill both of the pockets of my dress, so I pick it carefully as I go along, pausing every so often and dropping to the ground to properly pull sprigs off the plants while still trying to keep my knees from getting stained by the grass. I hum as I skip along, loving the way the air feels against my skin as it blows by. This is only the second summer in which Mama has allowed me to go out to play on my own and I savor every moment of it.

Behind me lies the valley where I and the other hedge witches live, tucked in between rolling hills. It gets ever farther away as I twirl and bounce along, moving in the general direction of the hedge that separates the town from the rest of the world. Somewhere, there is a gate tucked into that leafy border, but never having had occasion to go into town, I have never seen it. In fact, I pay the town very little thought, instead enjoying the way the dry grass feels under my bare feet.

And then I stop. I can see the hedge from where I'm standing but I'm more interested in the girl who emerges from it, tumbling through the branches to land on her knees. She looks up and sees me, then grins.

"Hello!" she calls, rolling up off the ground and brushing the dirt off of her dress. It's much nicer than mine, with lace and everything, which Mama says is impractical, especially for a girl who lives where we do, all the way out of town. The girl's blonde hair tumbles in curls down her back, actively fighting to escape from the clasp that has some of it pinned up. She approaches me, still grinning, her hand extended. "I'm Anne. I live in town. Who are you? Are you one of those hedge witches? I thought they were the only ones who lived out here."

I don't know what else to do other than tentatively shake her hand and say, "I'm called Harmony. I live over that way." I point back towards the little valley.

"So you are a hedge witch!" She looks thrilled at this discovery. "That's so exciting! Do you all really dance outside naked when it's the full moon?"

I can feel my eyes go wide. "No!" I bite my lip then, not sure how much I should tell this girl I've only just met. Mama says that we have to be careful about talking to strangers about what we do. "I don't do anything like that. And my mama only sells medicines to people who need them."

She seems to think about it, as if it contradicts what she's been told. "That's not nearly as exciting as dancing naked under the moon." She looks me up and down, clearly taking in the bare feet, the patched dress, the pockets full of heather, and the dark tangled hair that sprouts every which way from my head. "How old are you? I'm eight years old, but only just."

"I am too." We count in winters but it seems simplest to just go by her scale of aging.

The sun is setting in earnest, lighting Anne's hair on fire and reminding me that I should be getting home soon. I say as much but she simply sits down on the grass and motions for me to do the same. "No! Stay! It won't be dark for ages and we've only just met!"

My sitting is interrupted by the sound of my name being carried by the breeze. I look towards home and see a tiny figure that can only be my mother striding purposefully towards me. I wave.

"Harmony, flower," my mother says when she's close enough, "I needed you to be back with that heather when the sun started setting." She catches sight of Anne, still cross-legged on the ground, absentmindedly plucking at the grass to her left. My mother's face seems to close down as soon as she sees the other girl and she takes my hand. "It's time to go home now."

I give Anne a confused farewell wave as my mother pulls me along behind her.

Anne

I spend days waiting by the hedge for Harmony to return. It's as dull as it sounds – sneaking away from the house at playtime in order to make my way to the edge of town and through the leafy barrier, only to sit and wait while nothing interesting happens. It seems like I have less time every day, especially now that Mother has decided my training ought to start. She sits me down every morning after breakfast and instructs me to direct all of my focus towards the pebble she places in front of me. The first morning, all I did was stare at it, breaking my concentration every few moments to ask why I was bothering with this at all. It simply felt so dull. The next day, my mother told me to imagine the pebble floating into the air. It had only been this morning, four days after first receiving that direction, that I had managed to make the little stone wobble a bit on the table.

So far, I'm disappointed in what magic seemed to offer for me. Mother always easily casts her spells, pulling together vases I've knocked into and broken or, on rare occasions, silently changing Father's mind. But here I am, barely able to make a pebble float in the air. Being outside, away from Mother's disappointed encouragement, is a relief. I run quietly behind the falling-down houses that stand closest to the hedge, not wanting to draw attention from the people who live there. Gathering my dress loosely around my legs, I half fall, half roll through the hole I always sneak through, paying no mind to the inevitable grass stains. And, happily, for the first time since I first encountered her last week, Harmony is there, sitting cross-legged in the scrubby grass, her dark hair blowing around her face in a tangle. She smiles shyly when she sees me.

“I've been waiting for you for *days!*” I say happily as I join her on the ground. “I thought you were *never* going to come back!”

She bites her lip and tugs at some grass. “Mama wanted me staying around the house for a few days. She’s had me helping her with the gathering and the like.”

“Oh! Are you helping her make potions?” I lean towards her, propping my elbows on my knees. I want to know everything about the hedge witches over in the valley but every time I ask Mother, she tells me that I should in no way concern myself with them and that we – and our magic – are so much more civilized. But Harmony hardly seems like the kind of uncouth ruffian that I’ve been trained to anticipate so I wonder if maybe Mother just doesn’t like them.

Harmony nods and picks up a pebble, rubbing it between her hands. They’re all dirty, probably from gathering things for her mother. I take the pebble from her and place it on my palm. “Mother’s been trying to teach me to make one of these float but all I can do is this.” I focus on the stone in my hand and will it to rise upwards. It gives a half-hearted wiggle, as if it’s considering floating, just a little, but then decides it can’t be bothered. I sigh dramatically. “I can’t barely even get it to move!” I pause. “You can’t tell anyone about that. Mother says we’re not supposed to tell people that we do magic. Which is silly but it’s what she says.”

Harmony shrugs. “Who would I tell?” She gives the pebble a speculative look and then takes it back, placing it on her hand as I did, frowning a little. Then, to my surprise, the pebble lifts off her hand and rises to hover in front of her nose. She grins and lets the pebble fall back to the ground.

“How did you do that? I thought hedge witches didn’t do actual magic!” Or that’s what Mother always says. She says that all they do is ask nature to be kind to them and to make their potions and poultices heal people. It all sounds so powerless when she describes it.

Again, Harmony shrugs. “I asked it nicely.”

I scoop the rock off the ground and try to ask it nicely to lift into the air. It stays stubbornly still. “It’s not working.”

“Maybe your magic is different,” she says, as if it doesn’t really matter anyway. “Mama says that we can only do things because the earth lets us. So I asked the stone to float and it did. But maybe you don’t talk to the earth like that.”

I frown and throw the pebble far away. “It’s stupid anyways.”

Harmony

“Can I tell you a secret?” Anne asks, taking my hand and tugging me along until we sit in the shadow of the hedge, as if this spot, rather than any other, is the best for sharing secrets.

I nod the nod of someone simply grateful to have a friend willing to share secrets at all. For more than two years, we have been catching each other during playtime in this field and running wild, Anne always constructing some sort of game or scene that must be played through before the sun starts to set.

She sits, pulling me down with her, and leans into the hedge. “I like your kind of magic better,” she whispers, looking off towards the valley where I live. “It just seems so much easier. Sometimes I feel like my magic doesn’t want to happen and I’m fighting with it.”

I wonder what I’m supposed to say to that. That I like my kind of magic too? That hers doesn’t seem so bad and that I’m sure it’ll get better? “But we can’t do so many of the things you’ll be able to!” Mama says this is because we respect the limits that nature sets for us and Anne and her family don’t but that doesn’t stop me from being occasionally jealous of the things she might be able to do some day.

Anne brightens briefly at this thought. “Mother did say I would learn how to change minds someday. But right now all I’m doing is fixing pottery and it’s so boring!” She pulls a leaf from the hedge and tears it into pieces, throwing them one by one off into the field. “I just wish I could learn to do fun things now! Like make potions and talk to animals! Have you learned how to do that yet?”

“Not yet.” All of the time that my friend spends learning magic, I spend gathering herbs for my mother. I’m quite good at telling them all apart now but I’m no closer to learning how to talk to our cat. Part of me shares Anne’s frustration but I am always soothed by the realization that at least I am doing something practical.

“Well, at least you’re not doing exciting things without me.” She grins. “I’ll race you to that hill over there!” She’s on her feet and off through the grass before I can agree. I don’t bother trying to catch up. I know she’ll be happier if she gets to win.

Harmony

It seems silly that we still meet in the same field near the hedge after almost seven years. Anne always tries to pull me into the town, through the hole that she’s made steadily larger as she’s grown. I never go. I’ve been inside the border twice now, with Mama, both times to deliver a potion to one of her clients, but the other side of the hedge proved too loud and crowded for my taste, no doubt due to my fourteen winters of life in a quiet valley. So Anne always has to settle for telling me stories. She talks of suitors more than anything these days. Suitors and her magic.

“Mother has promised to show me how to change a mind after my next birthday!” she crows, excitement practically pouring out of her. “Can you imagine all the fun I’ll have then? I’ll be able to make Aidan Harrington – awful boy, really – go fall in love with someone else! Or make someone really handsome fall in love with me!”

I wonder if that’s all she think about, boys and love and marriage. She’s certainly gotten more careful with her appearance. Gone are the careless grass stains and unruly curls, replaced by clean linen and neat braids. Sitting next to her, I feel tan and shabby. “That sounds exciting.”

“You really should come to the party Mother and Father are having for me.” This is the fourth time Anne has raised the subject in the past week. “I’m sure I have a dress you could wear and everything.”

“You know I can’t.” Mama has never been enthusiastic about my friendship with Anne, even after she conceded that a girl my age needed someone to talk to. But she always reminded me that Anne’s family doesn’t see magic the same way as we do. For us, it’s a gift to be used for healing and helping. To them, it’s a power to be wielded. “Mama wouldn’t like me to be away for a whole night.”

She sighs dramatically – like she does everything these days – and lays back in the grass. It’s only just beginning to dry out so it hasn’t yet become prickly and uncomfortable. She takes my hand and pulls me down as well, so that we’re lying next to each other, staring up at the cloudy sky. “Everyone in town is just so dull,” she complains. She’s still holding onto my hand, like she did when we were younger and she dragged me off to run along the hedge. “And Mother has decided that the party is the perfect time for me to start wooing a husband. As if that’s the only thing I’m good for!” She snorts with laughter. “It’s ridiculous! At least you know that you just get to start learning how to run around naked in the moonlight to pray to the earth for life and healing and all of that.” She giggles. “Is there a specific technique for that?”

Seven years of insisting that her impressions of my family’s style of magic were incredibly wrong have done nothing to dampen Anne’s imagination. If anything, her jokes have gotten even more annoying since my mother actually began teaching me tangible things, none of which are remotely close to dancing naked in the moonlight. I have said as much more times than I can count and finally decided to give up on trying to correct her.

In response to my silence, Anne sighs again and sits up, letting go of my hand. My hand suddenly feels cold and lonely. “You don’t really think my parents will make me marry someone I don’t love, do you?”

I shrug. “You’d know better than I do.” My life has no equivalent concept of forced marriage or high society and that suits me perfectly well. “What would you do if they did?”

The smile on Anne’s face can only be described as frighteningly mischievous. “I would change his mind. Make him love someone else. Maybe someone who was already married!” Her eyes widen excitedly as she contemplates the possibility. “Can you even imagine? The trouble that would cause? Mother and Father would be livid.” This doesn’t seem to be too distressing a concept. If anything, it makes her smile more.

“But that’s not... You can’t just go about completely changing someone’s mind.” I’ve always found this part of Anne’s magical aspirations uncomfortable but now I am actually disturbed. “What about their free will?”

“What about *my* free will?” she shoots back. She’s getting angry and clearly would love nothing more than to have a shouting match.

Instead of complying, I roll to my feet, brushing grass off my dress. “Mama will be wanting me back.” Anne glares at me and waves me off, leaving me with nothing to do but turn for home. By the time I reach the top of the valley, the sun has started to set, turning the cloudy sky into a glowing stretch of pinks and oranges. The closer I get to the little grouping of houses, the more strongly I can smell dozens of different herbs being dried or boiled or burned. Sage, heather, wild rose, and aconite blend together on the breeze as the residents of the valley finish up their work for the day. I pass the houses of friends and cousins and one uncle before reaching my own. Mama looks up from the apron she is mending when I walk in.

“Stir the pot in the fireplace, would you?”

I do as she asks before looking around. “Where’s Baylor?” My boisterous older brother, usually the first to shout a greeting when anyone enters the house, is nowhere to be found.

Mama rolls her eyes, smiling slightly as she does so. “Your uncle has offered to introduce him to a master carpenter in the town so he can carry on his apprenticeship.”

“Would he have to move to town?” It’s rare for any of us to leave our little community but Baylor has always wanted the chance to go explore.

“Sounds like it.” She turns her attention back to the apron.

I contemplate the idea of my brother joining Anne’s world and am reminded of her jokes about hedge witches. My mother and I hardly ever discuss Anne or her family but our recent conversation is still weighing heavily on my mind and it gives me the courage to raise the subject. “Mama, why is Anne so convinced that we... Why does she have such silly ideas about what we do here?”

She takes her time answering my question but I see her frown immediately after my words leave my mouth. “Families who do that sort of magic – like your friend’s – think that what we do is old-fashioned. We rely on nature to provide for us, just like hedge witches have done for centuries. Where would we be without her gifts?” She looks up and I realize she expects me to answer this question.

“Well, we wouldn’t be able to make the things we do and so we couldn’t heal people.” I think about the time, years ago, when I made the pebble float simply because, as I’d told Anne, I asked it nicely. “And we would have to fight to make anything happen because we would be forcing it.”

Mama nods. “Exactly. But your friend and her family have found a way to do magic without nature’s help. They believe it comes from the self, that their power is inside them, just

waiting to be used. So we seem ridiculous for our rituals and our prayers because, to them, it is all unnecessary.”

“But why do they think we dance naked in the moonlight?” I feel awkward asking but Anne always seems to come back to that image and I want to know why.

She laughs, throwing back her head. “Years ago, when a hedge witch came of age, she and her peers would run out on the night of the full moon and take in all the power of nature. But the tradition was abandoned for drawing too much attention and for, quite frankly, being far too silly.” She laughs again and shakes her head, before returning her attention to the mending. “Go wash up and start chopping vegetables. I’ve laid them out for you.”

I nod and do as I’m told, unable to rid my mind of the image of hedge witches in the moonlight.

Anne

Mother is true to her word. The day after my birthday, she sits me down and tells me to listen carefully for she will only be explaining this once. I don’t dare to even fidget. “Changing minds is an art,” she begins. “It requires more than simply the desire to get your own way and should never be used to toy with people.”

I nod dutifully though I wish she would get on with the instructing rather than the long list of reasons the ability should not be relied on too heavily. She has always taught me that magic is meant to be used and now she is trying to teach me the opposite. But I have seen the way she subtly brings Father around to her opinions. She cannot convince me to do as she says rather than she does.

“To change someone’s mind is to plant a thought in their head and allow them to think it is their own.” She primly rearranges her skirts on her lap, despite the fact that they were already

smooth. “It requires the ability to create a link between your mind and the mind that you wish to convince but one must also be able to protect herself from the persuasions of others.”

I realize that Mother must have used her magic on me when I was being difficult but I refrain from asking about it, sure that I will not like her answer. “And how, exactly, does one create a link between minds?”

She seems perturbed that I have interrupted her preamble but answers nonetheless. “Just like with any other act of magic, you reach inside yourself to your well of power and draw upon it. Then imagine that you have created a hook with that power and reach it out to grasp the minds of others. Once you have a foothold in their mind, you can plant an idea.” She smooths her skirt again. “I assure you, it becomes easier with time.”

For some reason, I am reminded of the first time I explained to Harmony how the well of power works. She giggled, confused that we would think magic comes from within our selves rather than from the world around. I stifle a smile at the memory. Mother’s instructions are no more helpful than my attempts all those years ago to clarify the concept.

I spend the next hour unsuccessfully attempting to reach out to her mind. Only one effort brings me even remotely close to my goal. When the hour is up, Mother leaves to prepare for my party and instructs me to take a walk and practice reaching out to people.

A circle around the entirety of town has nothing more to offer but a few slight brushes against the thoughts of others and a terrible headache. I pause to rest on a chair in the parlor and place my hand on my forehead, willing the pain away. Mother scolds me when she catches me sitting still and ushers me up the stairs. My party will soon be upon us. I find myself wishing that Harmony were here to share it with me, if only to help calm my nerves.

But she isn’t and so there’s nothing to do but sit quietly while the maid pins up my hair into an intricate pile of curls and twists. It’s a heavy load and my neck is already beginning to

protest. Still, the reflection in the mirror shows me looking lovely, even more so once I am buttoned into the long gown Mother picked out specially for this occasion. The dusky rose color of the cloth is one not often seen in town. I know I will be the envy of every girl I have invited tonight and, likely, their mothers as well. I can see it in their faces as I drift gracefully down the stairs into the party. I smile, just as I am supposed to, taking in the looks of jealousy and adoration. All eyes are on me and I find the drama of my entrance quite pleasing. Off in the corner, I see Aidan Harrington, giving me the same predatory smile he always seems to direct my way. I do my best to keep my shudder internal.

And then I'm in the midst of the crowd, bombarded right and left by compliments and wishes for a good year. I can only just see Mother and Father off to the side, looking extremely pleased with what can only be considered a success. This party will be the talk of the town for months to come.

The quartet in the corner strikes up some music and suddenly Aidan Harrington is by my side, taking my hand, and pulling me towards the space quickly becoming the dance floor. Almost without thinking about it, I reach out with my mind and find his then whisper *You don't want to dance with me. You would rather dance with Elyse.* I see his eyes go hazy for a brief moment and then he releases me, seemingly forgetting I am here at all. I grin triumphantly as he pushes through the crowd towards the pimply, pudgy, and unbearably dull Elyse Andres and tugs her onto the dance floor.

I feel sure that everything has taken a turn for the better.

Anne

After ten years of trying to bring her around to the idea, I finally have the chance to show Harmony the town, an opportunity I embrace happily, even though I am not specifically the reason she is here. Instead, she has come with her mother to learn the art of hedge witch house

calls and to visit her brother before he leaves town to pursue the next stage of his artisan training. But now that all that is done, she is mine for the remainder of the afternoon. I drag her up and down the streets, stopping at my favorite street vendors for roasted nuts or tiny cups of mulled cider to fight off the growing chill.

We stay clear, though, of my house, for more reasons than one. Mother is entertaining a group of prominent women, all of whom, coincidentally, have sons who are still unmarried. She has yet to forgive me for driving away Aidan Harrington and seems determined to marry me off to whoever is willing and eager. And if that is not enough reason to stay away, there is also the fact that she has never approved of my friendship with Harmony. I cannot help but wonder if she fears that I will one day decide to run off to join the hedge witches, leaving behind all of her dreams of finding me an advantageous marriage. Truthfully, I have considered it more than once, though never seriously enough to make it a possibility. I could never live so far from town.

Harmony begs a break in the action when we reach the central square and we claim a bench off to one side. My friend looks somewhat overwhelmed by it all and continues to take in the scenery with wide eyes.

“If you came here more,” I say, “it wouldn’t be nearly as impressive.” I grin to indicate that I am simply teasing but Harmony only shakes her head.

“I couldn’t do it. Mama wants me to start taking over her house calls – and I will – but I would never come here more than I had to.”

“But can’t you just imagine? I think all the time about taking a room above one of the shops and running a business out of it, selling spells and potions and all sorts of magical things. We could do it together!” I look over at Harmony who seems much less wrapped up in the vision than I am. “Doesn’t that just sound like the perfect way to live?”

She shrugs. “I think I would much rather stay in the valley and take over Mama’s business. It’s quieter there. And, anyway, you couldn’t open up a magic shop here. They would burn you as a witch as soon as you opened up your doors.”

I lean in close, grinning wickedly. “But I am a witch! And you are too! Why are we hiding that? Why should we hide that?”

Harmony gets that look on her face that she does every time I get excited about magic: a slight frown that seems to mix sadness and concern. I expect her to give me yet another lecture about how magic is a gift that should be used wisely, not for one’s own gain, but she stays silent, instead looking off towards the group of people who have just entered the square. Among them, I recognize the newly married Aidan and Elyse Harrington – a wedding for which I cannot help but take credit – as well as a number of their equally detestable contemporaries.

Elyse spots the two of us and plasters a polite smile onto her face, which is still as pimply as ever, before directing her party towards us. “Anne!” she coos when she gets nearer. “I feel as though I haven’t seen you since the wedding!” She puts extra emphasis on the word “wedding,” clearly wanting to remind me that she was the one who managed to capture both Aidan Harrington and his fortune when he had been so set on me only a few years back. As if he wasn’t merely a castoff on my part.

“It has been too long!” I return, matching her smile with a falsely bright one of my own. “And let me introduce you to my good friend, Harmony.” I pull her upright off the bench. Her plain dress and sun-darkened skin are regrettable but she’s still far lovelier than any of the girls in Elyse’s group and I can see the men among them brighten with interest. This, I decide, is an excellent opportunity to show off for my friend.

The past three years have taught me quite a bit about the art of changing minds. Even Mother has expressed pleasure with my progress, though I can tell that it unnerves her how

quickly I have developed the skill. I reach out now to Aidan Harrington's mind with hardly any effort at all. *Tanya looks divine today*, I whisper into his mind. I watch his eyes move briefly out of focus and then turn towards the rat-faced girl in the back of the group. *She looks lovely enough that you simply want to give her a kiss. Right now.* I contain the urge to howl with laughter as Aidan moves swiftly towards Tanya and dips her backwards into a dramatic kiss. Elyse's eyes bulge out in panic as she screeches, "Aidan!" But I'm hardly ready to stop there.

I compel various members of the group to shed their clothes, skip and shimmy around the square, and plant kisses on each other's lips, all while Elyse looks on in horror. Only upon seeing the equally horrified look on Harmony's face do I release my grip on their minds.

They all stare around the square in something of a daze. I hear Aidan Harrington mutter, "Witchcraft!" as he glances around in search of the offending party. It clearly doesn't occur to him that she stands right in front of him. They gather themselves quickly and flee. Only then do I dissolve into laughter, unable to contain it any longer. Harmony, on the other hand, looks disgusted.

"What?" I ask once I've caught my breath. "You can't tell me that wasn't entertaining to watch!" She seems at a lost for words and, suddenly, I feel the need to defend myself. "They're all awful people! They deserve that sort of humiliation at least once! Just last week, I saw Elyse throw a rotten tomato into the face of a shop girl because it pleased her to do so. And Aidan is just... You should see the way he looks at girls! Like they're prizes to be won and then thrown away!"

"But you can't just invade people's minds like that!" It's the loudest I've ever heard Harmony speak and her cheeks are tinged with an angry flush. "Magic is not made to be used as a weapon! And what gives you the right to decide who deserves to be punished? You're just as awful as they are!" She gives me one last despairing look before gathering her skirts and running

off in the direction of the hedge. I watch her go. Surely she'll come to understand that I was simply having some fun. Creating some mischief. There was no harm done. If I wanted to do real harm, there are so many other things I could do.

Harmony

We can hear the bell tolling all the way in the valley. Mama looks up from the mortar and pestle where she is grinding dried lavender into a fine powder. I try to continue braiding a luck enchantment into the string bracelet I am making but cannot hold my concentration.

“Is that the fire bell?” I ask, setting the strings aside. “Is the town on fire?”

Mama shakes her head, a small furrow appearing between her eyebrows. “Not when they're ringing it like that. I can't say that it's ever been rung like that in my memory. That ring is usually reserved for...” She trails off and the furrow grows.

I chew my lip expectantly. “Reserved for what?”

“Executions.”

I think about the last time I saw Anne, months ago in the town's central square when she threw caution to the wind for a chance to show off her powers. “Executions? Like for witchcraft?” The minute the word leaves my mouth, Mama gives me a sympathetic look. I have not told her why I have not been seeing Anne but I suspect she understands that I was finally struck by the drastic difference in our uses of magic and that it was too difficult to ignore any longer.

“Your friend would have to have done something incredibly reckless to have found herself in that position.” She goes back to grinding up the lavender. “But I know you will not rest until you find out what is happening.”

“Thank you, Mama.” I kiss her on the cheek as I pull a shawl over my shoulders then run out the door. I'm breathing heavily by the time I reach the hedge but I push my way

through the now overgrown hole and continue running towards the center of town. The closer I get, the louder the sound of a crowd grows.

Anne

I can hear Harmony's voice in my head, just as I have been for the past few weeks. Every time I have changed a suitor's mind, I have heard her protesting that it is not ethical to invade a person's thoughts. Every time I have loosened a cobblestone or a chair leg in order to humiliate one of Mother's endless string of possible husbands, I have heard her shouting about the fact that magic is meant to help, not harm. And now I can hear her screaming that, if only I had listened, I would not be in this particular predicament.

I do wish I had listened.

The ropes are tight around my wrists and ankles and splinters from the wood piled around me dig into the bare soles of my feet. And all around me, the town calls for the burning of the witch. I should not have toyed with Aidan Harrington as many times as I did. I should not have made him run off with Marta Keyne. I should not have meddled with nearly as many marriages as I did. I thought I was making mischief but I was simply making enemies.

Far in the back of the mob, I can see Mother and Father, looking on in disappointment and shame. When the Town Guard came to take me away, Mother looked everywhere in the room but at me. Neither she nor Father stood up for me when I was on trial. And it seems that they will do nothing now. After all, what good is a daughter who cannot control her desire to do magic and does nothing but draw attention.

The magistrate reads the charges. I look into the crowd, hoping for a friendly face, but all I see are bloodthirsty eyes and brutal grins. Elyse looks positively thrilled at my fall from grace. The executioner comes forward with his blazing torch. The magistrate loudly asks

whether I will repent. I do not answer, though I regret everything. In my head, Harmony tells me that I am nothing but a stupid girl with too much power.

When I see her at the very back of the crowd, I think I must be hallucinating. The wood at the bottom of the pyre is beginning to crackle and burn. I realize that it won't be long now. My lungs begin to ache from the smoke. But there is Harmony. Though we have not spoken in months, I suddenly feel less lost and alone. I begin to struggle against the ropes that hold me. I do not want to die here on this pyre, tied to this wooden pole and wearing this stupid cotton shift. I do not want to die here in this town. Not anymore.

My entire body begins to feel warm and, at first, I think it must be the flames starting to burn my skin. But, looking down, I see that the fire is still only just beginning to char the wood. The heat, I realize, is coming from inside me. From my magic. It feels as if my well of power is boiling over, spreading magic throughout my entire body, lighting me up like a one of those firecrackers the traders bring through for summertime celebrations. I feel my magic burst out of me and fire in every direction, bowling over the members of the crowd and burning through the ropes at my wrists and ankles. I lose my balance and tumble down the smoking pyre, briefly feeling flames lick at my skin as I roll over them. I pick myself up off the cobbles, though I feel as if all of the energy in my body has been sapped away and that I am on the edge of fainting clean away. The people of the town lie unconscious around me. I make my way over them, not caring when I step on their hands or feet. I am looking for Harmony. I need Harmony.

When I find her, I shake her gently, rousing her from her dazed state. She blinks uncertainly and looks around. "What have you done?" That same look of horror is on her face but I don't have the time or energy to care.

"They'll live. And it doesn't matter anyway." I offer her a hand and pull her to her feet. "Run away with me. There has to be somewhere in this world where they don't treat magic like

this, right?” I can hear people around the square beginning to stir. My voice takes on more urgency. “If they catch me like this, they’ll just put me back up there and I’ll die! We can be free! We can do what we want! We can start over!”

She shakes her head, slowly and sadly. “Anne, I like my life here. I don’t want to run off just so you can find somewhere to flaunt your magic. I’m not like that.”

“It doesn’t bother you that they could turn on you any minute?” I shout, feeling my blood begin to boil. I wish I had enough energy to strike everyone down all over again. “They like you now because you help them to recover from sickness and sleep better and you rid them of boils but they won’t want you if you try to do anything else!” I begin to back away sure of nothing other than the fact that I will make for the hedge and run somewhere, anywhere, until I run out of the energy to do so. The cobbles dig into my bare feet. “They don’t really want you! They don’t love you!” I stop, pleading with my eyes. “Come with me.”

Harmony stares at her feet and shakes her head once more. I turn my back and start to run.

Harmony

For the briefest moment, I am tempted to sprint after Anne but I know that we will not be able to agree on anything. Not now and probably not ever.

The crowd in the square is almost entirely awake now. I know that any doubts they had about Anne’s abilities have been put to rest. If she ever shows her face here again, she will be killed swiftly. If only she had not been so reckless.

I leave the townsfolk to their confusion and anger and make my way home, stopping only to gather some heather as I walk along.

The Magician

Using knowledge, resources, and will to create change in the world.

“So you’re saying you stole it.”

“No! I mean, I never said that. I’m borrowing it. Temporarily.”

“And when you go to take it back? How’re you going to explain that?”

Chris – or, as the rumpled posters taped up around the cramped trailer proclaimed, The Conjuror – scowled, looking down at the old book in his hands. He held it gently; the dirty leather cover was sturdy enough but the pages within were loose and crumbling. “Look. It was just sitting there under a ton of dust, so no one’s going to miss it as long as it makes it back in one piece. And I *need* it. I need the ideas it can give me.”

Sam rolled her eyes and lit a cigarette. Despite being Chris’s performance partner, she knew she was remarkably unsupportive almost all of the time. “This is because the Ringmaster told you that your set sucked, isn’t it?”

“What? No! I mean, she’s a bitch – and looks ridiculous in all that neon and that makeup, by the way – but this is just, you know, about improving my material. And it’s *our* set.”

“First of all, we *all* look ridiculous in all that neon and that makeup. But it’s the intended aesthetic so suck it up or quit.” Sam took a drag from her cigarette, eyes roaming around the shabby trailer, taking in the stained couch that dipped in the middle, the tiny kitchenette, and the off-kilter table currently buried under neon costume pieces that would have probably been more at home at a rave. “And a week ago, you were saying that you thought the show was reaching new levels of perfection.” She tapped a small sprinkle of ash into the chipped mug Chris always insisted she use as an ash tray. She suspected he was too afraid to ask her to stop smoking altogether so it seemed only fair not to complain about the mug. “And anyways, why can’t you

just sell your soul to Satan – well, okay, you’re probably too lame for Satan, so maybe some lesser demon or something – like a normal desperate circus magician and be done with it?”

“I haven’t ruled it out,” he muttered, though he sounded a little stung by Sam’s tone.

“And my soul would interest a major demon. At least. But unless you just know how to set that up, we need this.” He chose that moment to dramatically flip the book open on the floor between them. A small puff of dust and dry binding glue rose into the air, making Chris cough.

Sam waved the dust particles out of her face and raised an eyebrow before examining the book. “You realize this isn’t in English, right?”

“It’s *Middle* English. Totally readable.”

“So read it then.” Sam blew some smoke in his direction, making him cough again.

Chris looked down at the book but his partner could see his eyes watering. She smiled, amused.

It seemed to take Chris a little longer than he had hoped to decipher the text. Sam watched as he bit his lip and furrowed his eyebrows. His glasses slipped down his nose a tiny bit but, in his quest to pull even the general idea from the pages in front of him, he didn’t bother to push them up.

“It’s an explanation of Egyptian magic.” Sam could hear him stop himself from adding “I think,” as if concerned she would pounce on any uncertainty. Considering the circumstances, she probably would. She was in a mood to critique weakness. “Apparently, becoming a, uh, true sorcerer requires years of study, around twenty of which should be spent in, um, seclusion? Yeah, seclusion. In the desert.”

“Oh good. I’m sure the Ringmaster would be happy to give you multiple decades of paid vacation so you can go seclude yourself in an Egyptian desert.” She reached over and flipped a few pages. “Why don’t you find the part where it tells you how to turn a skinny twenty-something dude in nerd glasses from a lame-ass circus magician into an actual Conjuror. Might

as well aim to live up your name, right?” She took another drag on the cigarette, this time blowing the smoke out of the corner of her mouth. “And make sure it’s in five days or less, because we’ve already become the unofficial concessions break and we’re probably close to becoming the officially unemployed.” She leaned back on her elbows and looked at Chris expectantly while lazily blowing an errant strand of long dark hair out of her eyes.

“Well, this bit’s about, hmm, it says some cultures believed you could gain magic by learning the true name of a deity or spirit. And that specific gods could bestow different types of powers.” He flipped a few more pages, trying to skim over the words as he did. “Um, magic from written sources is more potent than magic that’s been orally passed down. Especially when you’re using a spell to solidify a contract, apparently.”

“This is thrilling, really, but I don’t think we’ll need to worry about contract negotiations if we get *fired*.”

“Right, right.” Chris turned past pages that detailed the persecutions of magic folk by the Church and pages explaining what a normal coven meeting might look like. Sam watched as he flipped closer and closer to the back. He still had yet to find any sort of practical spells and she was sure the annoyance she was feeling was beginning to show on her face.

“Of course you steal the book that is *no* help. Maybe you should just do that thing where you go find a crossroads and bury a box of stuff and make a deal with whatever demon shows up.”

“Why do *I* have to be the one who does the soul-selling?”

“Because it’s *your* act!”

“*Our* act!”

“Whatever!” Sam dropped the smoldering stub of her cigarette into the mug and looked pointedly at her partner. “This is ridiculous. Watch some YouTube videos. Learn better tricks.

It's not like the standards here are particularly high. Or quit and go to Magician School and learn actually good tricks. Or get a job that actually pays and doesn't involve sleeping in a trailer and wearing neon and sequins! Because, let's face it – you're not going to sell your soul or find some spell or learn the name of a deity or— Are you even listening? I'm being mildly supportive and/or inspirational here!"

Chris was indeed not listening but instead was staring at the page in front of him. "I found it."

"The way to sell your soul? You realize I was totally kidding about that, right?"

"No. I mean, yes, I knew you were kidding, but no, that isn't what this is." He spun the book around. "They're spells."

"Plural? For what?"

"Everything! Boiling water, healing a cut or a boil, fixing broken pottery, sharpening or dulling a sword – okay, I don't really know how that one's still relevant – and, oh! There's one here to make things fly!"

Sam ran her finger down the page as he spoke. "Yeah, but that doesn't mean they work. I mean, come on. There's no way."

Chris turned the book back around so the words faced him again. "There's one way to find out." He skimmed the page until he found the one he wanted then pulled the makeshift ashtray/mug towards him while muttering the specified words. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the tiny cigarette stub caught fire. Chris yelped in surprise and tilted the mug so Sam could see. "*It worked.*"

"Jesus." Sam stared as the tiny fire burned itself out. "Try another one."

Chris did try another. And another. He made the water in his glass boil merrily and Sam's cigarettes fly through the air. He made a paper cut on his finger shrink to nothing and,

with some trial and error, made his hair turn from mousy brown to black to a vivid neon green. Sam watched it all with a raised eyebrow and an open mouth, unwilling to believe her eyes.

Chris pushed the book towards her. “Try a few.”

“No way.” But even as she said it, she pulled the book closer and looked over the page, picking a little paragraph at random. She stumbled over the words but was able to make Chris lift a few inches off the floor of the trailer. She was so excited she shrieked and Chris dropped back to the ground with a soft thud.

“We’re not going to get fired!” She clapped her hands, annoyance long gone and replaced with glee. “We get to stay in this psychedelic-themed hellhole of a circus!”

“We’ll have to copy all these down... For reference.”

Sam shook her head, a smile spreading on her face. “Oh no. That’s ours now.”

“But you said—”

“It’s magic. We’re keeping it.” She pulled another cigarette out of the pack, which had landed gently at her side after its flight around the trailer, and lit it. “You said yourself that it was covered in dust. Ergo, no one will miss it. And we’ll be in a different town in a few days anyway.”

Chris looked at the book doubtfully for a few seconds before starting to smile. “I guess we’ll need it for constantly changing the routine, right? And no one *will* miss it...”

Sam grinned. “Exactly.” She blew smoke into the air. “So I’m thinking our new act should start with you flying me in...”

The Devil

A choice, situation, or action that is contrary to your best interest.

Object: Mirror

Attributes: Ability to trap souls, favors young women with fair complexions

Acquisition: Successful, object terminated, girls rescued

This was their first case together. After all the buildup and preparation, namely the long hours Jonah had spent convincing his older brother Martin to join him in the venture that had always been his dream and the even longer days spent sifting through second-hand and occult bookshops for useful resources, they had finally gotten a case which, in Jonah's eyes, justified the entire thing. Martin was still skeptical – one magic mirror that may or may not have been absorbing people did not a business make. But he went along, not wanting to disappoint his baby brother.

When they pulled up at their client's house, Jonah was immediately disappointed, though he tried to hide it from his brother. There was no huge foreboding mansion waiting for them, no dilapidated old building covered in ivy and other creepers. Just a regular suburban house, maybe a little larger than average, covered only in beige siding with a grey roof and some ornamental columns. Not even a cobweb anywhere in sight. But he kept his feelings to himself and slapped on a professional and, hopefully, comforting smile.

Of all the mirrors they eventually dealt with, this was always Jonah's favorite, if only because it was their first. But there was also something infinitely intriguing about a mirror with a particular taste in women. Their client, a harried but perfectly coifed housewife explained, with an air of not fully being able to believe the absurdities coming out of her mouth, that her two daughters, ages fourteen and seventeen, had both gone missing in the days following the family's acquisition of an old antique mirror, inherited from her husband's recently deceased great aunt.

The older daughter, the first to vanish, had always been something of a drama queen, prone to “running away” for a day or two before skulking back, craving a home-cooked meal. But the fourteen-year-old was nothing if not a homebody and her disappearance, a day after her older sister, had been much more concerning. That later that same night, the mother had walked by the mirror, now stationed in the upstairs hallway, and been terrified to see her daughters staring back out at her.

Jonah and Martin inspected the mirror, trying to give off the impression that they were completely sure of their actions despite the fact that they most definitely weren't. Jonah muttered observations and his brother noted them down, things like the mirror's apparent preoccupation with young girls with blonde hair – after all, the mother had been left untouched and she was neither young nor blonde – and its ornate frame – here, even more quietly, Jonah expressed a wish that he knew more about interior design, if only to know when the mirror might date back to. With no other ideas, they informed their client that they would be taking the mirror with them and would, in theory, soon return both her daughters and a mirror that no longer trapped people inside it. She did not seem particularly soothed by their attempts at professionalism.

Though neither of them was willing to admit to it, both brothers were rather uncomfortable with the mirror and so they silently agreed to leave it overnight in the trunk of Martin's car while they spent the time pouring over the old books that Jonah had acquired over the weeks since deciding upon this particular profession. The tomes, for that was really the best way to describe them, were all musty and leather-bound, with titles written in unreadable ornate lettering. Every so often, one of the two would find something potentially useful and jog down the stairs of the apartment building to the car to test out the incantation or combination of herbs or, once, hilariously, ritual dance movements.

It was at 3 a.m. when Martin found yet another promising chant and stumbled down to his car to try it. Much to his surprise, as he reached the second stanza of the vaguely Latinate text, the mirror began to unleash a bizarre and unearthly scream. He nearly stopped with surprise but pressed on, watching as cracks began to appear around the mirror's frame, working their way, spider-web-like, towards the center. He only just managed to get his arm up to shield his face as the mirror shattered violently, sending glass flying in his direction.

Jonah, who had fallen asleep with his face smushed against one of the books, woke with a start at the shattering sound from down below. He made it to the window in time to see his brother, glass in his hair and a bemused expression on his face, surrounded by not two but, by his count, seventeen young women with blonde hair.

They managed to keep half their promise – their client did get her daughters back but the mirror was, perhaps not unfortunately, unsalvageable.

Object: Broach

Attributes: Possesses wearer with the spirit of its original owner

Acquisition: Successful, spirit neutralized

This was their first case with the van. Business had been good enough – eighteen successful disposals! – that Jonah had managed to convince his brother that it was time they travel in something more practical than Martin's tiny Toyota sedan. They'd shopped the used car lots for something that didn't look like it had been formerly owned by a team of kidnappers and finally found one. As a surprise for Jonah, Martin had called up an old friend who owned an auto painting business and convinced him to paint SUPERNATURAL DISPOSAL EXPERTS and their phone number onto the side of the new old van for cheap. He'd pulled the money from his own

savings instead of their business account and knew every penny had been worth it as soon as he saw the look on his baby brother's face.

This case was also their first that had come to them through a former client's recommendation. Jonah joked that it was about as close as they were going to come to a repeat customer because, really, how many people came across more than one cursed object in their lifetime? They met the woman at the flea market stall she ran and she more or less threw the broach at them after giving them the briefest possibly summary of what had happened: she'd come across the broach in a secondhand shop while hunting for things to sell and decided to keep it for herself, until, of course, she'd realized that, every time she wore it, she blacked out for hours at a time, leading her to believe it was possessing her. After multiple attempts at disposing of it in her trash bin only to have it reappear in her jewelry box the next morning, she had decided it was time to call the professionals. All and all, it was barely enough for Martin to fill one page in his notebook but the woman was entirely unwilling to elaborate. She handed over a wad of cash as payment and informed them that there was no need to tell her how it all turned out.

The brothers had handled a few other possessed objects by that point and they followed what they already thought of as their standard method: research into the object's history and then a swift exorcism of the spirit using an old spell they'd found in one of Jonah's books. They called secondhand shop where the broach had been purchased and followed its story backwards until they found Mrs. Maureen Warren: born 1804, died 1887, a cantankerous railroad baron's widow, beloved by no one, and exactly the kind of person who would attach their spirit to an ugly old cameo broach.

It was Jonah's turn to perform the exorcism and he did, though there was much fussing on Mrs. Warren's part and more than a few of the windows in the apartment rattled in their

frames. Martin supposed that they would be getting a few more noise complaints. Those had been growing in number recently.

With no official owner to return the now docile broach to, they sold it to the nearest pawn shop and left it at that.

Object: Dice, one pair

Attributes: User becomes addicted to gambling, first fueled by a winning streak, then ultimately loses everything when the dice turn unlucky, leading to eventual suicide

Acquisition: Unsuccessful

This was their first real fuck up. It was bound to happen sometime, especially since they'd been doing so well. Jonah was more beat up about it than Martin was but he was still upset in his own quiet way.

Even the day started badly. They were late leaving to meet the client and when they made it down to the van, they found that someone had taken a sharpie to the words on the side, blacking out most of the letters so that it now read PE N IS EXPERTS. Martin figured that he would have found it all somewhat more amusing if they hadn't already been running behind or on their way to meet someone to whom they wanted to appear professional.

As it turned out, their client wasn't even the owner of the object – one pair of battered old gambling dice, based on the picture he showed them – but the son of the owner. He was worried about his father who, never a gambler in the past, had begun to spend more and more of his nights down at a local casino. What had begun as a winning streak was now threatening his parents' retirement fund in a major way. The catch was that his father was reluctant to be parted from the dice at all and they would probably have to be retrieved by theft or subterfuge.

They split the task of research and planning – Jonah poured over the books in the hopes of finding something about the history of the dice and Martin took the floor plan of the house they'd be, unfortunately, breaking in to. It seemed easy enough in theory. No alarm, no pets, just an older couple, both of whom would hopefully be sleeping. Martin figured they would get in, grab the dice, and get out, then neutralize whatever curse it was that was causing all the fuss. Jonah had already found several references to what seemed to be the same pair of dice, wreaking havoc around the country for the past fifty years or so after having apparently been cursed by a man left destitute by the temptations of a Las Vegas casino. He was somewhat pale when he looked up at his brother and explained that the dice had a habit of leading people to commit suicide when they hit rock bottom. Martin was quick to assure him that they would be working well ahead of that final stage of the curse. He said it with a confidence he didn't entirely feel but it certainly seemed to calm Jonah a little.

If he'd been right, things would have probably gone a lot better but when the brothers pulled up in front of the house, they found themselves looking at an active crime scene, police tape, flashing lights, and all. A bystander informed them with a somewhat vicious-seeming contained gossipy glee that there'd been a double murder-suicide. The man living in the house had gotten into some sort of argument with his son and then pulled a gun, proceeding to kill both the son and his own wife before shooting himself. It was just such a tragedy, the neighbor said, though he didn't seem to mean it at all.

Jonah took the news hard. He returned to the van in a stunned silence and then didn't say anything for the next day and a half. Martin returned to the scene once the cops had cleared out and scoured the house for the dice but didn't find anything. That was something of a crushing blow – he had hoped that, even though they couldn't save the family that had hired

them, they would be able to prevent any similar future tragedies. He never told his younger brother about his attempt to find the dice. If anything, it would have just made things worse.

Object: Grimoire, circa 14th century

Attributes: None magical, bound in human skin

Acquisition: Successful after a certain amount of skilled bartering

This was the case that wasn't so much a case but rather the result of Jonah finding an ad on Craigslist for an "Authentik Midevil Book of Magic" and deciding that he wanted to follow up on it. Martin passed on the outing, figuring that someone who could spell neither "authentic" nor "medieval" was unlikely to know a real spell book if it stood up and described itself in perfect modern English. He was glad to see Jonah getting excited about something though – even four months later, the Dice Incident, as he had come to think of it, was still weighing heavily on his younger brother's mind, despite all of Martin's attempts to alleviate the depression. If anything was going to get him out of his funk, though, it would be the prospect of a new old book.

For his part, Jonah knew it was a long shot – the spelling of "medieval" was enough to send up red flags – but if it was the real thing, a book like this was too good to pass up. His reference collection had been steadily growing as he'd hunted down books on specific objects they were working on or come across other similar, albeit less sketchy, ads online.

More than that, though, Jonah wanted to get out from under his brother's concerned looks. He knew that Martin worried about him and he had, admittedly, been in something of a depressed state since that whole thing with the dice and the murders and the suicide. It had shaken him, no question. But there hadn't been any other real calamities of a similar scale since then (though the time they accidentally released a vengeance demon in their apartment had nearly become one) and so now it was just a matter of making Martin stop hovering so much.

He figured a show of enthusiasm would be enough to convince his older brother that he was doing just fine now.

Jonah followed the directions the GPS dictated in its halting computer-generated monotone, eventually pulling the van to a stop in front of a ramshackle double-wide trailer hiding in the far back corner of a lot full of nearly identical, though slightly better-kept, trailers. He took a deep breath – dealing with people was generally Martin’s field – and knocked on the door gently, worried that hammering too vigorously would cause the door to cave in.

The man who opened the door was oddly incongruous with his surroundings. He wore a very neat three-piece suit, though was admittedly a little on the shabby side, and had perfectly combed hair, parted what had to be exactly one inch off-center. In a voice reminiscent of an enthusiastic university professor, he ushered Jonah inside, pausing to admire the neat sign on the side of the van and asking a few good-natured questions about the business of paranormal object disposal. The trailer smelled strongly of Earl Grey tea and Jonah was hardly surprised to be offered a cup – which he politely declined – within seconds of sitting down.

The series of questions of questions thrown at him made Jonah feel as though he was sitting through some sort of examination or interview. The man wanted to know what sorts of objects he had dealt with, what sort of books he already owned, whether he worked with a partner or on his own, how far they had traveled for cases, and, bizarrely, whether or not he was squeamish when it came to human remains. Jonah managed to squeeze in one question when his host paused for breath: the man in front of him seemed to have a perfect command of the English language, so why the egregiously misspelled ad? The man laughed this off and explained that, rather like this deluge of questions, he was simply looking for ways to deter those who were unworthy of the book.

When at last he was satisfied that Jonah fit his standards of qualification, the man pulled a battered lockbox from under the arm chair he sat in and unveiled a volume roughly the size of a mass-marketed paperback book. It was bound in what the man gleefully explained was actual human skin and contained the kinds of spells that had gone out of style when grimoires had started being printed on presses rather than handwritten and treasured for generations.

Jonah was certain that he would have paid his entire savings for that book – and not just so he could say he owned a 14th century grimoire bound in human skin – but the man, for all his neat and educated appearance, seemed perfectly content to let Jonah bargain the price down from \$1000 – already an obscenely low amount for something like this – to a measly \$170. The amount was paid in cash just as soon as Jonah had a chance to flip through the pages and declare that it was at least seemingly authentic.

He took the book and didn't look back but did arrive back in the apartment with a giant smile on his face. Martin was so relieved to hear his brother brag about a book acquisition that he didn't even bother to question its origins or be disturbed out by the fact that their library now contained a book bound in human skin.

Object: Silver salad tongs

Attributes: Presumably haunted, have a habit of attacking unsuspecting users, often clamping onto extremities such as the nose

Acquisition: Termination successful

This was probably their most ridiculous case. Not in the sense that there wasn't an actual paranormal object to be disposed of but rather in the way that the entire process resembled some sort of slapstick comedy act.

Martin had offered to handle this one on his own – it seemed easy enough and Jonah had been so incredibly absorbed in translating the tiny grimoire he had recently acquired that it seemed almost a crime to disturb him. But the younger brother was also itching for a new case so he pried his eyes away from his new toy and went along.

When Martin killed the van's engine, he was concerned he had mixed up something in the directions. Even Jonah, who was constantly jabbering on about getting more and more prestigious clients, seemed somewhat unsure. The house could only be described as a mansion and one in a perfect state of repair at that. The hedge looked like it had been trimmed with the aid of a level or possibly a laser beam. Still, after triple-checking the address, they got out and walked up the white-pebbled walkway. Martin felt like he was dirtying the immaculate brass door knocker as he used it to knock three times. He was somewhat surprised when they weren't greeted by a butler, but rather a rather normal-looking, if expensively dressed, teenage boy.

It took every ounce of the brothers' professional abilities not to get distracted by the ornate decorations of the living room or the portrait-perfect family that sat in front of them describing a rather embarrassing incident at a recent outdoor picnic fundraiser involving an old pair of silver salad tongs. They ran through their list of usual questions – Was the object inherited recently? Was there any history of odd stories surrounding the object? – before following the patriarch into the kitchen to inspect the offending tongs.

It appeared that the tongs were ready to put up a fight. As soon as they were released from the serving utensils drawer, they leapt out of the man's hand and made a wild snapping leap at his nose. Anxious to protect the client, both Martin and Jonah made a leap for the tongs at the same moment that the client himself tried to dive out of the way. Martin collided with the man and toppled to the floor while Jonah intercepted the tongs with his right ear. In trying to pry the tongs off his brother, Martin managed to have his hand taken prisoner instead. It took at

least fifteen minutes of similar antics before the tongs were bound up and declared safe for transport. Jonah laughed the entire way home and Martin, though embarrassed by the way the house call had gone, was so happy to see his brother cracking up that he couldn't help but join in.

Back at the apartment, Jonah ran through the gambit of usual incantations but couldn't manage to undo any sort of curse or dislodge any kind of spirit. A second round search through the books, including the translated bits of the grimoire, was equally unsuccessful.

In the end, Martin called in a favor to a friend with a forge. The tongs were melted down, the silver carefully buried in the form of a lump of cooled metal, and the family was told that they would, unfortunately, not be getting the object back. After hanging up the phone from that call, Martin was under the impression that they didn't seem all too torn up about that fact.

Object: Human skull, in pieces

Attributes: Remnants of demonic possession

Acquisition: Successful, at cost of two lives

This was their last case. Looking back, it seemed that almost two years of work had built up to this inevitability though, beforehand, neither brother would have admitted the possibility.

They got the call for help from a woman they had met along the way. She worked the carnival and fair circuit, telling reading palms and Tarot cards, to supplement her income as a substitute teacher. The brothers had gotten a few referrals through her before – she found them both infinitely capable and incredibly entertaining. This, though, was the first time she'd ever needed them to help her directly.

The object in question was the human skull she kept on her reading table, mostly for the added ambience. She'd picked it up years back at a medical school auction of some sort and it had traveled around with her ever since. Never once had it acted up. Two days ago it had spun

around and started talking. Her first instinct had been to smash it with a candlestick. Even in pieces, the skull had continued muttering.

Sitting in the fortune teller's kitchen, Martin found the whispering bits of bone scattered on the peeling Formica table in front of him extremely discomfoting. Jonah, on the other hand, was fascinated. He pulled out the grimoire, now fully translated and almost permanently carried in his jacket pocket, and began to flip through it for some sort of explanation. Their fortune-telling friend took one look at the book and urged Jonah to burn it or bury it, just so long as he got rid of it. Martin, disturbed by her tone, echoed the suggestion. Jonah merely laughed off the warning with a wave of his hand and, pointing to the skull, suggested that it might be some sort of demonic remnant that had been recently woken up, for whatever reason. Without an explanation, he rushed out to the van, returning with a rusting broadsword they had found at an estate sale several months back. Then, without giving his brother or their client so much as an indication of what he was about to do, he opened the human-skin-bound book and began to summon the demon living in the skull fragments.

If the book had been one of their other battered reference books or if the demon had been any one of a number of lesser demons or maybe if Jonah had been a little less foolhardy or even if they'd just had a better sword, things might have gone differently. But the reality was that none of those things was true and so the demon that came swirling out of the broken skull was not weakened, as Jonah had intended, but instead had little trouble breaking the neck of the fortune teller and then pulling the broadsword out of Jonah's hand with no more effort than one expends taking candy from a baby in a stroller. Jonah froze, bereft of his sword and betrayed by the book he'd devoted so much time to. For a moment, everything hung still.

Then, all at once, it seemed later, Martin began to yell out the first all-purpose exorcism he could think of, Jonah began to back away from both the demon and the dead body, and the

tiny house began to shake with each step the demon took towards his new prey. Martin closed his eyes, reaching for each next word of Latin – the spells were Jonah’s forte, after all, and Martin was surprised he even had one exorcism memorized. There was a scream, then another, then an odd choking sound, and finally silence, though the room was tinged with the smell of sulfur. Martin opened his eyes and saw that the demon was gone. But he also saw Jonah on the floor against the wall, broadsword protruding from his middle and blood dribbling down his chin.

For months afterward, Martin replayed the moment over and over in his mind and second-guessed every one of his choices. Second-guessed the entire meeting, really, from the moment they’d sat down with the fortune teller. But in the moment, things seemed to unfold with a stark and unwavering precision. Martin held his baby brother as he bled out. He wrapped his brother’s body in a tarp found in the back of the van and carried it back out. He cleaned up the blood with bleach and a sponge found under the kitchen sink, scrubbing until there wasn’t a single trace of red. He knocked over a few chairs and pushed the fortune teller’s body onto the floor. He called 9-1-1 on his cell and said that he had heard some sort of loud scuffle at this address and that he was worried someone might have gotten hurt. He drove the van until he found the turn off for a campground he and his family had visited years ago, then found a particular area overlooking the nearby lake that his brother had always loved. He dug a hole and lowered his brother’s body into it, then covered it back up again. He drove back to the apartment and systematically carried each one of the books, scrolls, and pamphlets down to the giant dumpster, then dropped in a lit match. He got back into the van and drove aimlessly for three hours before pulling over on the side of a random back road.

Only then did Martin start to cry.

Death

An ending making transformation possible.

Harold Rubin cried when he walked out of the bathroom and found his wife dead in the hospital bed that had for some time been taking up a large part of their bedroom. He cried because it was over – nearly seventy years of a marriage that had led to three children, seven grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, and a love to compete with any romance – and because it was finally over – three years of cancer and watching the love of his life slowly waste away.

Harold cried again that first night, and again two days later when his oldest son delivered the eulogy, and yet again when the first shovelful of dirt was dropped upon the coffin. Each of those times, he cried until he felt like he was out of tears and yet they still managed to return with each new wound.

It took five days before everyone was gone. The children and grandchildren had departed in a trickle, returning to jobs and school. The stream of condolence-givers and fellow mourners had tapered off. The hospital bed and the hospice workers were long gone. For the first time in almost seventy years, Harold was alone in his empty house. And for the last time, Harold cried.

When the tears had stopped and his body felt hollow, Harold walked to his closet. It took him a little longer to get places these days, even with the help of his cane, and it took him a while to get the doorknob to turn like it was supposed to. The door swung inwards and Harold felt along the wall for the light switch. He flipped it up, illuminating the little closet. His clothes hung neatly along the walls and his shoes were all in place, but he was more concerned with the small cardboard box in the corner. It took him a while to bend down and lift it up, though more because of its placement on the floor than because of its weight. It really weighed hardly

anything at all. He placed it under his arm and closed the closet before returning to sit on his bed.

Harold looked down at the box in his hands and stared at it for several minutes, thinking. The box itself was far newer than its contents, having replaced an earlier vessel which itself had likely been the third or fourth container. The cardboard was incredibly dusty, so much so that it made Harold cough when he brushed the fuzzy film off of the lid. He kept it closed, though, and stared at it a little longer.

The box had come to him from his father who, as a young man, had ended up on the wrong side of the Russian Revolution, and fled to the United States with his wife and infant daughter. They'd had nearly nothing to begin with and their income had been stretched even thinner when Harold had been born two years later. But they had always had the box, in case of the worst, Harold's father had said. It had been several years before Harold had learned what the worst could really look like, when his father had died of a sudden heart attack, leaving the little family without any form of income. That was the first time he had seen what the box contained. He took a deep breath and opened it now.

That first time he had looked inside the box, its contents had seemed somewhat anticlimactic – nothing but a little old book, covered in faded blue cloth with a barely visible gold Star of David printed on the cover, six tin candle holders and corresponding candle stubs, and a cracked dish of some indeterminate metal. His mother, tears newly dried on her face, had laid out the objects in what was apparently their proper formation – one candle at each point of an invisible six-pointed star with the dish in the center. Once she was done, his mother had shooed him out of the room and told him to go play with his sister before closing the door to the tiny bedroom she had once shared with her husband. An hour later, she had emerged looking shaken but resolute, a crumpled envelope in her hand and the news that, thanks to his father's careful

planning, they would not be destitute after all. At nine, Harold had been all questions, wanting to know what his mother had been doing in the room with those candles and how she found the money that his father had set aside. Instead of answering, she had shaken her head and told him he would understand when he was older.

Older, as it turned out, had been when he turned eighteen. His mother had taken him aside on when he had returned from a night out. He was in love then, sure he had found the woman he was going to marry – a feeling that, as it turned out, was exactly right. When he got home, he had wanted nothing more than to happily relive his birthday celebrations over and over as he drifted off to sleep. Instead, his mother had decided it was time to show him the most important part of his inheritance.

He had immediately recognized the box when she pulled it out from under her little rickety bed. This time she didn't remove its contents but she handed him the box, saying, "It is your birthday, Harold. You became a man today."

"I thought I became a man five years ago," he joked, trying to lighten what felt like a strangely tense moment. His mother only gave him a look that confirmed that this was no time for comedy.

"You know as well as I that the worst sometimes happens."

He nodded, thinking of his father's death so many years before. "Yes, mama."

She looked at the box in his hands. "The Torah teaches us that witchcraft is wrong – no one but God should have that kind of power – but there are times when only the power of God can help. And sometimes we must do that for ourselves." She looked back up at his face. "That little book contains prayers of a particularly... *effective* nature. For when the worst happens."

Harold tentatively set the box on the bed and lifted out the book, looking at his mother for consent before actually picking it up. It felt sturdy, ordinary, and rather like the average

prayer book. It made a soft cracking noise as he opened it. The faded type was in Hebrew and, at first glance the prayers were not so different from the ones he saw every Friday evening and Saturday morning at the synagogue. But as he looked more closely, he began to see that some of the things the prayers asked for were a bit more extreme than peace and protection. He looked back to his mother. “Is this actually suggesting what I think it might be suggesting? Because that would be...” He tried to come up with the proper word. “Unnatural. No one can raise the dead, mama!”

“No. But we can bring them back for a few minutes.” From the look on her face, Harold knew that she was remembering whatever had happened all those years ago after his father’s death. “Just for a few minutes.”

Harold was never quite sure why he had dropped the book so emphatically or backed out of the room so quickly. After that, his mother had never raised the subject of the box. When she had died, he had removed it quickly from under her bed and stashed it deep in the back of the closet in his new house without a word to his sister who, as far as he knew, was unaware of the box’s existence. Once, while cleaning, his wife had found it but he’d written it off as an old collection of family junk that he didn’t want to look at but couldn’t quite bear to dispose of.

He’d considered taking it out and flipping through the book when his wife was diagnosed with cancer. If there was a prayer to raise the dead, there must be one to cure illness. But he told himself that that was equally as unnatural, that she was eighty-eight years old, and that this was the normal way of things.

Now, however, the box was out of the closet and open on his lap, the little blue book as unassuming as ever, the candlesticks and bowl rattling around every time he shifted slightly. He could hear his mother’s voice in his ears: “For when the worst happens.” This – feeling alone,

bereft, empty – surely this was that worst. And this would be only for a few minutes. Just to say goodbye.

Carefully, he took each candle holder out of the box, placing them gently on the bed. He had no candles – nor would he light them on the bed – but as soon as he found the right prayer, he would put everything in place. He flipped through the pages, scanning each Hebrew title for something relevant. When he found the one he was looking for, he read it carefully twice through before gathering everything back into the box, reaching for his cane, and beginning the slow journey downstairs to the kitchen. A brief search of the cabinets and drawers resulted in six mismatched candles, all presumably left over from Shabbats of the past, and a book of matches. Consulting the book as he did so, he set the candles in their holders and moved them into the same configuration he remembered seeing in his mother’s bedroom so many years before then set the dish gently in the center. It took him a few tries to light the match but as he moved it towards the first candle, he suddenly stopped. In what seemed like a single movement, he shook out the match, dropped it to the table, and sank into the chair he had pushed back only moments ago. He stared at the unlit candles arranged in front of him and then at the book open to a prayer that could raise his wife – or a shadow of his wife – from the dead for a few minutes. He thought about what he would say to her. What could he say that he had not already had three years – or seventy years – to say?

The answer, Harold knew, was that there was nothing.

He sat for a bit longer, looking past the candles and the book at the old fichus that had quietly dwelled in the corner of the kitchen for decades. When he felt ready, he piled everything back into the box and carried it back upstairs, placing it carefully back into the spot where it had gathered dust ever since he’d taken it from his mother’s bedroom. That done, he settled on his bed, cane leaning against the side table, and turned on the television.

Perhaps, he thought, the best thing to do was to simply watch some football.

The Hanged Man

Willing surrender to an experience or situation.

It happened in the laboratory, that sacred space of science and experimentally-proven fact. He hadn't meant to do it. But it had happened all the same.

Magic had come back into the world.

Dr. Bradbury Renfrew – Brad to those people he grabbed after-work drinks with and who might vaguely be considered friends; Renfrew! to his supervisor – had only turned his back for a second after putting the beaker over the flame of the Bunsen burner. All he'd done was turn towards the trash bin to throw out the latex gloves he no longer needed. He'd simply been following protocol. But, of course, that had been all the time needed for everything to change.

Hundreds of years before Dr. Renfrew's well-intentioned turning of the back and after enjoying millennia of peaceful coexistence with humans, Magic had found itself, as a concept, threatened from all sides. The quest to explain the world – natural or otherwise – was leading to skepticism. In another corner, religion was becoming increasingly hostile towards anything remotely heretical. And, on top of that, the market was becoming ever more enchanted by machines. There was increasingly less room for wonder, whether it be inspired by amazing spells or by fantastical creatures. Indeed, all that wonder was quickly turning into fear.

In the end, Magic had been forced into dormancy.

Perhaps it was the complete lack of anything even vaguely magical in that laboratory that woke it up (for plenty of people could tell you how magic, in a diluted, decidedly everyday form, can exist in the joyful parts of life, all of which were absent from that tiny, mundane, fluorescently-lit basement laboratory). Or maybe it was the combination of chemicals in that beaker, a mixture which would have combusted not too long afterwards in a large puff of smoke anyway, in which case Magic ultimately did Dr. Renfrew a favor.

Regardless of the reason, the beaker still gave a soft shudder and emitted a few sparks before the whole lab – and presumably the floors above – began to shake. For at least two days, newscasters would devote a substantial amount of airtime to the apparent earthquake. But only until the news of magic leaked out of closed conferences of scientists and government officials, at which point the name and face of Dr. Bradbury Renfrew would be plastered across newspapers and television screens around the world.

In the moments after the tremor (a shaking that would register as a 4.3 on the Richter Scale), however, Dr. Renfrew was simply trying to understand how the Bunsen burner had gone out and why the mixture in the beaker had suddenly disappeared. It was at this point that Sonya Martinez, a graduate student not yet possessing a PhD, returned from her lunch break, wild with excitement about the recently-concluded earthquake.

“Did you *feel* that?” she yelled far too loudly for Dr. Renfrew’s taste. “When was the last time we had an earthquake *here*?!? We’re not even near a fault line!”

What both Sonya and Dr. Renfrew were unaware of at that moment and what every seismologist on the planet was puzzling over was the fact that the tremors were continuing out from the epicenter of that little laboratory and rippling out across the world. Of course, that was merely a side effect of Magic spreading itself across every inch of the Earth but it would be quite some time before anyone would be willing to raise that possibility, let alone seriously consider it.

Dr. Renfrew ignored the grad assistant’s continuing babble and returned his attention to the still confusingly empty beaker. Perhaps the tremor had temporarily raised the heat of the burner, causing the solution to rapidly evaporate. Hardly a satisfactory or realistic explanation, but more plausible than the idea of the mixture spontaneously disappearing. As for the extinguished flame, it could only be explained by the triggering of an emergency shut-off valve by the earthquake. That theory seemed much more reasonable, calming Dr. Renfrew’s confused

mind. He removed the beaker with a shrug and mixed a new batch of the solution – this time in the proper, non-combustible proportions – and set it over the burner.

Meanwhile, computer programs were narrowing down on the laboratory as the origin of the still-rippling tremor, and special teams of government operatives were pulling on tactical gear while mentally preparing themselves for any possible scenario. Almost exactly four hours after Magic burst back into the world of reality, a strike team broke down the door of the lab, scaring every last bejesus out of both Sonya and Dr. Renfrew. Sonya screamed. The strike team demanded they put their hands in the air.

Thirty very tense and confusing minutes later, the team reported that nothing of interest had been found in the laboratory or either of its adjacent storage closets. They informed the scientists that they could carry on as usual and departed, awkwardly propping the door back up as they exited.

Dr. Renfrew put in a call to his superior to report the bizarre incursion and the damage to the door. All he received in return was an exasperated sigh and instructions to lock up the lab before he left. That evening, Dr. Renfrew did as he was told, then proceeded to the nearest bar to get extremely drunk.

It was because of the excessive amount of alcohol in his system that he neither believed nor remembered the small cluster of fairies twinkling in a hedge as he stumbled back to his apartment. But while he was lurching into his bed, police stations all over the world were receiving a record number of apparent prank calls regarding the sightings of a whole host of magical creatures and, in one case, a child sprouting wings and flying off over a cow pasture. Indeed, it was all true, though the police almost unanimously chose to disregard the calls. With Magic waking up came a second awakening, this time of all of the creatures who, for the most part, had remained dormant for as long as Magic itself had been. In another few hours, those

with magical blood in their veins would find themselves able to do all sorts of interesting things. But Dr. Renfrew snored on, oblivious to all the changes he had accidentally released.

The world's leaders, on the other hand, were decidedly not sleeping, but instead surrounding themselves with the best scientists available and spending hours on the phone talking to one another, all in the hopes of reaching some sort of satisfactory explanation for the tremor and, now, the bizarre rise in magical creature sightings. Analysts were combing internet traffic for anything suggesting a widespread hoax or anyone claiming credit for causing the tremor. Geologists were speculating as to how bedrock might be made to mimic an earthquake, and the very best graphics experts available were picking apart the videos of fairies, unicorns, and mermaids that were being posted by the dozens on YouTube, trying to determine whether or not the footage had been doctored.

Magic, however, was quite pleased to be awake and was taking full advantage of the global confusion to wake up not only its creatures but also its humans. A young woman in Yorkshire suddenly found herself able to summon a teakettle with only her mind. In Yunnan, China, an old man finished planting a rice paddy much more quickly than anticipated with steps much faster than he had taken in years. In Antarctica, a middle-aged researcher had a strange but enlightening conversation with a seal.

Practically none of these incidents made it to the morning news, though, so Dr. Renfrew went off to work blissfully unaware of the crazy things that had happened while he had slept. (He did not even notice the absence of the hangover he really should have had but that had been done away with by Magic as something of a thank-you gift.) Sonya, on the other hand, was full to the brim with conspiracy theories she'd picked up on an insomnia-fueled trek across the internet.

“They’re saying the earthquake was caused by some sort of underground detonation and that it could only be a matter of hours before we all start mutating from some weird sort of chemical that was released by the whole thing!” Sonya paused to hand Dr. Renfrew the batch of test tubes she had just finished prepping. “Actually, there are already people who are starting to show some weird freaky traits. Kind of like the X-Men!”

“And where exactly are you getting this compelling evidence?” Dr. Renfrew didn’t particularly care about his assistant’s conspiracy theories but he was feeling more indulgent than usual that morning, so the very least he could do was ask her a few questions that would keep her chattering happily along.

Sonya shrugged. “Message boards. The internet in general. People are talking. They want answers. Because apparently that earthquake – or whatever it was – sent ripples across the entire frickin’ planet.” She turned to Dr. Renfrew. “What if that’s why those guys showed up here yesterday?” She sounded exponentially more excited now. “Because it all started here?!?”

“I sincerely doubt that.” For a brief second, Dr. Renfrew’s mind allowed itself to wonder if maybe that was true. It would certainly go a little ways towards explaining the oddness with the beaker yesterday. But he quashed that idea and went back to carefully placing each test tube into the centrifuge.

“Oh come on!” Sonya pushed herself up onto the shiny black counter. It was against protocol – not to mention pretty stupid in a lab full of chemicals – but Dr. Renfrew didn’t bother to scold her. “It had to start somewhere, right? And, trust me, things were shaking pretty good upstairs. Put that together with the fact that we *never* get earthquakes here – yup. I’m putting that on the boards when I get home tonight.”

Dr. Renfrew had a brief mental image of a pack of conspiracy theorists showing up tomorrow wanting to examine the lab for evidence of aliens or ghosts or whatever the hell they were into. “Please don’t. And go grab me a box of blank slides, would you?”

Despite his active desire not to think about the earthquake anymore, Dr. Renfrew couldn’t help but dwell on it as he moved around the lab that day. It remained on his mind as he took the subway home and, when he fell asleep, he dreamed uneasily of odd creatures rising out of the floor of his laboratory as the entire world shook.

It was also that night, probably around two or three in the morning, that a tiny old woman in the corner of the President’s meeting room cleared her throat and proposed the absolutely absurd idea that perhaps this whole situation could not exactly be explained by science. What if the bizarre sightings and incidents increasingly taking up space on emergency call lines were not a widespread hoax but instead indicative of an actual increase in supernatural activity?

Of course, the rest of the people in the room had a good chuckle at that suggestion and the old woman melted back into the shadowy corner where she was sitting. But there were more than a few attendees of the meeting who were somewhat taken by the idea, even if they would never admit it. Those individuals each found the old woman after the meeting concluded, all stifling yawns from nearly two days of no sleep, and asked her to explain her theory in more detail. A few very unofficial calls were put in to similarly minded people in other countries. A small contingent of experts began to assemble evidence pointing towards the still admittedly absurd possibility that something not unlike magic had come into being.

Sensing that humans were closing in on the correct explanation, Magic woke up a few more of its children. In Paris, a little girl craving a cookie suddenly found one floating towards her across the table. In a village outside St. Petersburg, a woman muttered an old-fashioned

curse under her breath and was shocked to see the suggestion carried out. And in the Australian bush, a young man drained his friend's snakebite of venom with a wave of his hand.

It was among these people – and the people around them – that something else was starting to grow. A sense of wonderment was beginning to spread across the world. Unlike Magic, it was not accompanied by a planet-wide earthquake and it did not draw the attention of government agencies. But as people watched their friends, neighbors, children, and siblings do extraordinary things or noticed fairies dancing in meadows or ran screaming from dragons that had taken up residence in high mountain caves, they could not help but be astounded, without thought for reality or explanation. And with that same sense of wonder and excitement, a local newscaster in Pennsylvania was the first to broadcast footage of water sprites playing in a public park's fountain. It did not take long for other news outlets to follow suit.

So when Dr. Renfrew awoke that morning and, as usual, turned on the television, he was surprised enough by the content of the reports to check his calendar to make sure that April 1st was not somehow randomly occurring in the middle of June. Still, despite his disbelief, he felt something tickling the back of his brain, a memory that did not fully form until he spotted a cluster of fairies in a hedge on his walk to the subway. The same cluster of fairies in the same hedge he had stumbled past on the first night of Magic's Awakening, as it turned out. And with that secondary sighting, Dr. Renfrew felt as though his mind began to not only wake up, but also expand.

By the time he reached the little laboratory, he had several notebook pages full of bullet-pointed ideas and vague sketches. His mind was racing and inspired in a way that it had not been for years. For while world leaders and their pet scientists were still dithering over how to explain the tremor, Dr. Renfrew had begun to take that next step – he had begun to question how the world might use its new gift.

When Sonya arrived for the day – thankfully unaccompanied by any fellow conspiracy theorists – she found her supervisor surrounded by sheets of paper and small measurements of chemicals, as well as a few pieces of metal that appeared to have been borrowed from various pieces of lab equipment.

“Are we, uh, changing tactics?” she asked after clearing her throat and awkwardly taking loud steps towards him had done nothing to rouse Dr. Renfrew from his trance. “Because this doesn’t look so much like chemistry as it does a crazy person on the brink of becoming a mad scientist. Which, you know, would be cool too. Probably more fun anyway.”

Dr. Renfrew looked up at her, something of a manic gleam in his eye. “I think we let magic out. And I want to use it. For science.”

“What?” Her love of conspiracy theories and strange knowledge aside, Sonya was just a tad disturbed at the moment.

He held up a sheet of paper covered in what looked like some derivation of calculus mixed with random zodiac symbols. “The earthquake. I think it was us! Or me, at least. Not on purpose, obviously, but I think something got out. Because they’re finding dragons – dragons! – in the mountains right now. There was a unicorn on the news! And that kid who was talking to animals like it was nothing! Plus all those people who are able to summon things with their minds now. Magic!”

“Dr. Renfrew... Are you okay?” Sonya began to contemplate the option of taking a few steps back. If nothing else, she’d barely ever heard Dr. Renfrew string so many words together without there being a command or reprimand in their midst. That alone seemed worrisome.

He shook a different sheet of paper in her direction, this one covered in diagrams of what looked like car engines. “I think we can use it!” He tossed that page aside and picked up another. “Imagine if cars ran off magic instead of gasoline! Or if we could use fairy dust! Or

those dragons!” He rummaged around in the pile of papers and pulled out his laptop, opening it and pulling up a browser while he continued talking. “Have you seen all that news coverage? And meanwhile, they keep reaching out to scientists and to the government and asking them questions – but *no one knows anything!!!*” He turned the laptop towards his assistant, a news clip from that morning playing on YouTube. “*We* could be the first to know something!”

Sonya watched the clip in wonder, not even listening to the voice of the reporter. It depicted a man standing in the center of a field, surrounded by random objects – a rake, a tractor, something that looked like an old barn door, a dog house. One by one, he sent the objects floating away across the field. She looked up at Dr. Renfrew, mouth agape. “Please tell me you’ve tried to do this.”

“Didn’t work.” He spun the laptop back around and set it on the table. “I think there are only certain people – maybe with some sort of genetic predisposition – and we could definitely look into that at some point because I’m sure that would be fascinating – but there are only some people who are able to use magic like that. *But*. I think we can harness it another way. I tried replicating the combination of chemicals that I was using when the whole thing started, but that didn’t work – I think it was a random event – so I’m now trying to figure out other ways to draw in the magic without having to actually use one of the affected people or any of the creatures.” He paused and laughed. “Listen to me! This would have sounded *insane* yesterday!”

“It still sounds insane,” Sonya tossed in dryly, but she was already sorting through the papers scattered around Dr. Renfrew, occasionally asking questions when his notations didn’t make sense. She found that she was quite enjoying this new cheerful superior that Magic had apparently unleashed.

Dr. Renfrew was not the only scientist slowly making progress. The old woman from the President's council was meeting with her allies and examining the same news reports and pieces of raw footage. Their plan, however, was slightly different. They boarded planes to an airport not so far away from Dr. Renfrew's laboratory. And once they were all assembled, they got in cars and made their way there. Unlike the previous contingent sent along by the government, however, this group did not break down the door to the basement lab. Instead, the old woman simply knocked.

It was past the end of the usual workday in the lab but Dr. Renfrew and his assistant were still hard at work, pouring over sketches and making new ones, occasionally throwing together odd mixtures of chemicals that either did nothing or gave off somewhat concerning puffs of smoke or blasts of sparks. They had just managed to get something more promising – a twinkle that might be called magical – when they heard the dainty knock on the door.

The old woman extended her hand to Sonya as soon as the door opened. “My name is Dr. Henrietta York. These are my colleagues. We've been working on a few hypotheses concerning the recent, ah, events taking place around the world and we strongly suspect that they may have originated here.”

Sonya looked at her supervisor who looked at the small delegation in the doorway. Then he clapped his hands. “Yes! Come in! We've actually been working on a similar vein of thought, although with considerably more focus on what can be done now that all this magic is in the world. Or, quite possibly, back in the world. That is as yet unclear.”

Dr. York and her people flowed in through the door, immediately engaging Sonya and Dr. Renfrew in conversation, wanting to know what they'd found, how they'd found it, and what they meant to do with it. There was some agreement but significantly more disagreement, as

well as a few raised voices. The conference, such as it was, lasted well into the night, even as Magic itself was finishing up its process of waking up its children and its creatures.

In the morning, Dr. York called a press conference. The scientists stood outside the building that housed the lab, fanned out in a professional-looking line. Dr. Renfrew shifted uneasily from foot to foot in his place at the center of the group. Sonya had to be content off to the side.

“Three days ago, a tremor shook the world, baffling scientists and government officials alike,” Dr. York began. She had a prepared list of remarks on the podium in front of her, but had decided to go with the flow of the moment instead. “At the risk of sounding absurd, we, as members of the scientific community, have begun to entertain the possibility that magic has returned to the world. Now, before you can grow skeptical – and yes, I can hear the groans and laughs – consider the footage that has been airing on local news stations around the country. Consider the odd reports of strange phenomena that have been cropping up around the world. Some of you may have already witnessed such things. In the coming days, we have reason to believe that nearly everyone will.” She looked solemnly into the faces of the press, as if daring them to contradict her. “I would now like to introduce Dr. Bradbury Renfrew who will present a number of ideas concerning our future in this new world of science and magic.”

On television stations across the world, the name Dr. Bradbury Renfrew had been posted on the screen. He tugged uncomfortably on his collar and swallowed, as if completely aware of every single pair of eyes watching him from every corner of the globe. He swallowed again. And took a deep breath. Then he launched into his speech, following each passionate explanation of an idea with yet another equally excited one. The press watched, captivated, moving only their pens across their notepads.

Now spread thin across the entire world, Magic settled comfortably and prepared to watch the world change.

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