

The thing that all magicians understood, and which all wizards failed to understand, is that greatness is determined not by what one is able to do, but by what one is willing to risk. That had been his problem—or so John Coventry reflected as he stroked the yellowed page of *Theurgica Sinestra*. He'd been afraid to take risks. He'd clung to the same old dream, hoping that things would end differently this time. He'd closed his mind to alternatives, which was the one thing a magician must never, ever do.

His red finger glided down the page. A smear of blood followed it, though not so thickly as to obscure the words beneath.

The mongrel stared up at him through sagging eyes. Some minutes ago it had been thrashing, but now it lay in gruesome stillness.

John wiped the sweat from his brow. Removing the flesh surrounding the ribcage had been slow work, making for a rather tedious lull in the ritual. The sleeves of his fine, artisanal robe were irreversibly bloodied. Finally, though, he was nearly there. He bent down and firmly grasped one of the mongrel's upper ribs. He twisted and tugged until it came away with a satisfying crunch. Then he did the same with the adjacent rib. He reached into the remaining gap. He closed his eyes and felt his way through the moist folds, ridges, flaps, and pouches. Deep inside, the carcass was still warm. John found something that might have been a lung, or at least a part of one.

Then he knew he had the heart. The muscle was firm in his fist. He gently pulled and twisted, wrenching it out. He stepped back, cradling it in his left hand like a golden egg. He wiped off a few bits of flesh and clotted blood.

He and the mongrel surveyed each other with equal indifference. The hairs on the dog's shaggy coat thrust themselves upward, clinging together with blood, grease and grime. John found himself imagining how he might paint the carcass as a still life. A greenish-black underlayer perhaps, which would penetrate even the merry candle that danced over the motionless corpse.

This was freedom, he reflected. Detachment. He had spent his whole life—more than four centuries—chasing this or that woman, weeping over this or that grave, tossed about by circumstances like a leaf on the wind. That would end tonight. His sentimental weakness would die with this dog.

He placed the heart on the altar. A church was the ideal site for such a ritual since it was nearly as risky as it was offensive. As soon as John removed his hands, black flames sprung up on the surface of the altar and encircled the heart. The flames licked the herbs John had placed there, and the chancel filled with a musky odor. However, the herbs did not burn, and the black flames did not dwindle.

He stepped back from the altar, remaining within the glowing circle he had drawn around it. He began to speak in a voice that vaulted above the choir and echoed through the rafters.

"Tiersch kahallam tzuhier ganach, Zkanuthel duolumche nguruksema!"

He paused, soaking up the resonant silence. Next, he deviated from the book, improvising his invocation rather than repeatedly chanting the magic words. He could never bring himself to follow instructions precisely.

"Here in this house of angels and demons, I call on you, Zkanuthel, the heart-eater. Heed my call, and hear my story.

"When I was young, I loved love. I reveled in debauched intimacy, and I kept solemn fidelity. I made love to women, to men, I even made love to ideas. I could hardly look at a flower, or a mother bird on her eggs, without feeling overwhelmed by the love I saw there. I lived to love, and I thought love made life worth living.

“Then, time passed. Decades became centuries. Wives and children came and went, each of them taking a piece of me as they did so. Each loss plunged me into a deep pit, while each new spark sent me soaring above the clouds. With every fall I fell lower, and with every ascent I soared higher. Up and down I went, always searching for that final summit from which I might never fall.

“And then, all of a sudden, I had an epiphany. I realized that no amount of love would ever make me happy. People would always disappoint me, in the end. Inevitably, they would reveal themselves to be more selfish or foolish than they seemed. Or they would simply die, which is a bit selfish, if you ask me. On that day, I began to accept the truth: that in the end, love does not satisfy.

“Love always leads to disappointment, as surely as opium leads to regret. At least when a man takes opium, he knows, on some level, that he is making a bad decision. But a man in love is convinced beyond all doubt that he is making a good one! And so he goes on fighting for his heart’s desire, only to discover, days or decades later, that his efforts were misguided.

“He will grow tired of his lover, or she will grow tired of him, or they will both simply become bored, an inevitability that new distractions can only temporarily abate. And if a man is very, very unlucky, he might just find a lover who is perfect for him, and who remains perfect, in which case she will only abandon him through death. And then he will know the deepest kind of suffering a human being can know. He will instantly forget the happiness they shared. The memory of her face, or of her voice, or the sound of her name, will bring him only agony. And if he lives long enough, the memory of her will ultimately pass from the temple of despair to the attic of irrelevance.

“Short-lived or long-lived, sexual or chaste, faithful or fraught, wherever there is love, despair is on its heels like a shadow. Sooner or later, the day will come when a man finds that his love has turned to dust. Love always dies. That is the story of my life, in three simple words: *love always dies*.

“Perhaps if I were a mortal man, things would be different. I would go to my grave bitter and spent, but satisfied that I had experienced all life has to offer. But this? Trudging on when I know there is nothing left but more poor decisions, empty promises, and dashed hopes? I can’t bear it anymore! Do you hear me Zkanuthel? I am tired of love! It is a fruit whose bitter aftertaste far outweighs its sweetness!

“If God were merciful, he would have killed me long ago, but he has not, so I turn to you, Zkanuthel, the demon they call the heart-eater. My heart is yours, on one condition. A trifle. All I ask in return is to be happy. And not the temporary euphoria of love, mind you, I mean lasting happiness. I’m tired of mustering up the will to live. I want to *want* to live. I want to be happy, living. That’s my price. Nothing more, and nothing less.

“Do this thing for me, Zkanuthel, and what’s mine is yours. I’ll give you my heart gladly. I’ll serve you faithfully. Give me happiness, and I’ll give you as many hearts as you desire.”

John muttered the magic words one more time, bowed, and slid his hands in the appropriate sequence of gestures to seal the pact.

Then he waited. The heavy rasp of his breathing echoed in the cavernous church. The black flames were eerily silent, as they burned without consuming. The pews, the lectern, the columns that ascended into darkness, all shifted and coalesced in the twilight of the black flames. John took a cautious step toward the altar. Then another.

The altar was exactly as he had left it. The herbs, the flames, and the mongrel’s heart all seemed to be patiently awaiting whatever they’d been assembled for.

He turned and addressed the empty pews.

“Where are you?” he bellowed.

"Zkanuthel?"

The church taunted him with its silence.

"SHOW YOURSELF!"

John's breathing became more ragged. What would happen now? Where was Zkanuthel? Had the ritual worked, or not?

He looked around frantically for a sign. Then he found a pair of dark eyes looking back at him.

Zkanuthel.

No. It wasn't Zkanuthel. It was just the mongrel. Skin of the torso peeled away, mouth open and tongue lolling, the dog was no longer a dog but death itself. Death was laughing at John.

Dear dear, said Death. What were you expecting? Haven't you learned by now that you cannot escape your destiny? The harder you fight your fate, John, the harder fate fights back.

With a yell like a war cry, John pounced on the carcass. He ripped the opening in the skin, extending it down the dog's belly. Intestines spilled out with an audible squelch. He grabbed them and began throwing organs at the pews. One by one the stomach, the liver, and a kidney splattered on the righteous seats. He yanked out a rib, spun around, and threw it at the crucifix behind the altar. It bounced off the crucifix with a feeble knock.

He stalked toward the crucifix where it hung on the wall. It was nearly as tall as he was. He tried to pull it down, but it did not come away easily. Clinging to it with all his strength, he lifted it, and then pulled forward, hard. It came free with such force that he lost control, and the crucifix careened into the altar. The wooden altar grated forward several feet, and the candlesticks on either side of it toppled over. John swayed where he stood, and then dove for the crucifix.

He hefted the crucifix up in both hands and carried it to the nearest stained glass window. By the moonlight, he could make out Mary Magdalene gazing up at Christ with adoration. With a grunt that stretched into a growl, John steadied his grip on the crucifix, and swung it at the window. It shattered with a deafening crash. He moved to the next stained glass window. Saint Francis. Another crash. John the Baptist. Crash. Glass fell like rain in a lethal thunderstorm.

John cried out in frustration and threw the crucifix down before his feet. The mongrel, Christ on the cross, the saints, they were all dead, and he could not perturb their righteous eternal slumber. The only creature in that church with any capacity to suffer was himself. How could it be that he was the most powerful creature in the room, and yet he felt so weak? He longed to feel strong, courageous, invincible, everything that foolish mortals thought immortality would bring. He envied mortals. He envied the dead. He envied everyone, for whether by fortitude, grace, or ignorance, they were all happier than he. None of them could suffer as he could, and for the first time in his life, he was unashamed of the fact that he longed to watch them suffer.

~

"Don't chicken out on me, Caitlyn."

"I'm not chickening out, I'm just saying that maybe we should stop and think about this."

"Don't you want to know why the forbidden forest is forbidden?"

"Of course I do, but don't you want to... you know... not be expelled?"

Rochelle smirked. She pulled down her hood, and a puffy black braid tumbled down her back.

"I dunno," she shrugged. "That'd sure get my mum and dad's goat, wouldn't it? They send me off to some posh boarding school to learn some discipline, and then I just get expelled."

Caitlyn smiled half-heartedly. She pulled down her own hood, releasing her copper curls. The cold night air nipped at her ears and her rosy cheeks. The sensation was painful, but it also made her feel alive.

Rochelle's boasting was only that, but for Caitlyn, expulsion was a very real possibility. She was a mediocre student, and always had been. Academic probation had lost its threatening edge, and she'd settled into a permanent state of precarity. The worse her grades got, the harder her parents pushed her, which made it even harder to get decent grades. The problem was she couldn't bring herself to care about schoolwork. What was the point of writing essays no one would read, and of memorizing facts that she'd never use?

Maybe a part of her wanted to be expelled.

"Fine," Rochelle huffed. "If you don't want to come, I'll go alone. You can go back to bed like a good girl."

"No! I want to come."

"Then quit your griping and come on!" Rochelle urged with exasperation.

Despite Rochelle's impatience, for a moment, neither of them moved. Time slowed as they teetered on the edge of the forest. Tall trees stood before them like stolid guards in shadowy green cloaks. These guards bore no weapons, as if to say that the forest could defend itself.

Finally, without ceremony, Rochelle strode into the mouth of the forest, like a valiant knight into a dragon's lair.

"Lumos," Caitlyn muttered. A beam of white light emanated from the tip of her wand. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder, and then hastened after her friend.

The forest path was wide and flat. Caitlyn had always imagined that once one traveled deeper into the forest, the path would become overgrown and rocky, like the one Hansel and Gretel took to the witch's house, or the one Snow White took to escape the queen. But as the girls marched on and the moon ascended toward its zenith, the path remained charming, tidy, and safe.

Together, Rochelle and Caitlyn had made a point of exploring as much of the campus as they could. They'd crept behind locked doors and skulked through off-limits corridors. Occasionally, their curiosity was rewarded. Among their discoveries were various forbidden books, more than a few tricks and trinkets that had been confiscated from students, an amulet that glowed during the full moon, a plant whose very odor had made them both sick, and a room containing nothing but a single vial of clear liquid. That Hogwarts had so many secrets was one of the campus' few redeeming qualities. Without all those hidden dungeons and trapdoors, the campus would have been as boring as its lessons.

Of course, being at a school of magic was special, and Caitlyn didn't want to be ungrateful. But when the most exciting spells and items were prohibited, a little rebellion was necessary just to remember why any of it mattered in the first place.

Suddenly, Rochelle veered off the path.

"Rochelle! What are you doing?"

"Whatever is worth making this forest off-limits is probably not going to come wandering onto the path, is it? We'll have to go looking for it."

"You can't be serious."

Rochelle turned and tossed an exasperated look at Caitlyn.

"Of course I'm serious! What's the point of coming out here if we're not going to take a proper look around?"

Caitlyn bit her lip. Rochelle was waiting with crossed arms.

Caitlyn took a timid step off the edge of the path. Her heart skipped a beat as she sank a couple of inches into the soft earth, which was lower than the tall undergrowth suggested. However, she quickly found her bearings, and strode forward with squishy steps. Heart fluttering with excitement, she smiled up at Rochelle, but Rochelle was already forging ahead.

Caitlyn had to lift her knees high to navigate the undergrowth. Her boots quickly became sodden. The cold infiltrated her socks and chilled her whole body. Her little wand light caused shadows to flicker in her peripheral vision. The trees loomed like ghostly silver statues. They were more like someone's interpretation of a tree than the real, ordinary thing.

Despite the cold, Caitlyn felt a thrill coursing through her body. It felt wonderful to break the rules! Consequences be damned! She just wanted to feel like she could go where she wanted, when she wanted. The truth was, she even craved a little danger. Her parents had never let her anywhere near so much as a kitchen knife, let alone a steering wheel or a boy. She wasn't allowed to watch television, cook her own meals, or choose her own school schedule. She was too young to know what she wanted, they'd said. Caitlyn would have preferred if they'd just come out and admitted that they believed she was a failure, and that she could not be trusted to make her own decisions.

She took a long, deep breath of misty night air. She hadn't noticed the mist until now. It tickled her legs and obscured the ground, so that the tips of the ferns protruded upward like aquatic plants in a swamp.

She had fallen well behind Rochelle. The sound of crunching leaves disclosed Rochelle's direction, but her black cloak was nowhere to be seen among the mist and shadows. Caitlyn picked up her own pace.

Her friendship with Rochelle was an odd one. They were more like allies than friends. They'd been pushed into the same margins and made to carry the same resentments. They did not so much enjoy each other's company as they simply permitted it. Apparently, that was good enough. Maybe that was simply what friendship was supposed to feel like. Caitlyn wouldn't know. She had never been very good at making friends.

A hooting penetrated the cold stillness of the forest. Caitlyn looked around for its source. Directing the tip of her wand toward the treetops, she scanned them for signs of movement. Something glinted and shuddered. Squinting, she suddenly found a pair of furious orange eyes. She jumped a little, and her wand jostled unsteadily in her hand.

A moment later, she was chastening herself for being so easily spooked by such a little thing. It was only an owl. She gripped her wand more tightly and took a few steps forward. Then she hesitated. The terrain before her was unfamiliar. Had she gotten a good look at it before she'd been distracted by the bird? The mist was taller than she was now, and thick on all sides.

She listened for Rochelle's footsteps again. Animals scurried about, rustling branches and snapping twigs, as if they'd suddenly received word that it was time to emerge from their hiding places. Caitlyn couldn't discern any human sound.

A wolf howled.

Caitlyn's heart was beating fast, much to her annoyance. She wasn't frightened. Nevertheless, her wand quivered in her hand, and the snap of a twig sent a jolt up her spine. She chastened herself again. It was just a forest, and they were just animals! A wolf would have more cause to fear her than she it.

Peering into the mist for any branch or gap that looked familiar, Caitlyn had to admit she was lost. However, she wasn't about to raise a distress flare, which Rochelle probably wouldn't see and perhaps a teacher would.

She strode forward with renewed determination in what she thought was Rochelle's direction. In any case, if she kept walking in a straight line, she would reach the edge of the forest eventually. Then she could walk around the edge of the forest to get back home.

On and on she walked. Gradually, her frozen feet grew heavy, and she felt as though she were wearing shoeboxes instead of shoes. The mist was so thick that she could only see a few feet in front of her. She was determined to walk in a straight line, but the occasional boulder or boggy rut forced her to make little detours. With each obstacle, she reassured herself that she was still going mostly straight.

The sounds of animals scratching and chittering emanated from under the forest's dewy shroud. Gliding through the mist, she felt like she was on a boat that was about to sail off the edge of the earth. Every time the mist cleared to reveal a few more feet of earth, it was a little surprise, so convincing was the illusion of nothingness ahead. Monotonous black trees followed more monotonous black trees. She began to feel she was stuck on a treadmill, seeing only the same painted landscape on a loop. She was moving without traveling, walking faster and faster just to stay in place.

Another wolf howled.

Suddenly, Caitlyn felt a feverish desire to get somewhere, quickly.

She began to run. The mist billowed up around her as she tore through it. Her stiff feet ached, but the sensation of her own inner heat was liberating. Running made her feel powerful, despite the difficulty of it. More than once, she nearly stumbled on a rock or a large stick as she clumsily crashed through the undergrowth.

The animals around her sounded their excitement. Rustling became distinct footfalls. Squeaks and chirps became shrieks and growls. She could have sworn she heard something cackle like a hyena. She ran as fast as she could, vocally panting as she struggled for air. Then something large crashed through the bushes behind her. Padded feet were pursuing her, she could hear it!

"Rochelle!" she cried desperately.

"Anyone!"

Soil flew out from under her feet as she barreled forward. Her throat tightened, and her lungs pleaded for more oxygen. She didn't know or care where she was going now, she just needed to get out of this mad jungle!

Suddenly, a man's voice rang out.

"Who's there?"

Caitlyn halted in her tracks. The forest became dead silent. Whatever had been pursuing her had halted, too—or had she only ever imagined it? There was no sound now, except that of her own heart crashing in her ears.

Off in the distance, she glimpsed an uncertain light. She moved toward it. She did not pause to question whether the man was friend or foe. She just wanted to encounter something real, something besides mist, and shadows, and phantom animals.

"I said who's there!" the man called. "Show yourself!"

Caitlyn wanted to reply, but the words caught in her throat. She was breathing hard from her run. It took all her energy just to lift her feet in the direction of the flickering firelight.

"Show yourself!"

"I am... I'm coming!" she called out feebly.

She trudged closer, and eventually approached a clearing. Through the thin layer of trees now separating her from the clearing, she could see that the fire came not from a single campfire, but from a ring of candles around the clearing. A figure stood in the center of it.

When she stepped into the clearing, she half gasped, half laughed.

"Professor Hennessy!" she cried. "Thank God it's you! I mean, of course it's you!"

She laughed as she bent over, catching her breath and nursing a cramp in her side. Before her stood John Hennessy, the Hogwarts art teacher, who lived in the art studio near the edge of the forest. It was a little odd to find him here at midnight, dressed in a garish robe of black, red, and gold, and with a thin beard she'd never seen before. Still, there was sure to be some logical explanation.

Then she remembered that the forest was forbidden, and she cast her eyes downward.

"Professor, I'm sorry, I know I'm not supposed to be here, I just... I..."

As she fumbled for an excuse, she trailed off. The bearded, oddly dressed professor was looking at her with an inscrutable expression. Brow furrowed, eyes hard, he looked as if Caitlyn had just threatened bloody murder rather than apologized. His palms were open by his sides as if he were holding something in them. Then she noticed something else odd about his appearance. He wasn't holding a wand.

"Professor? Is everything... are you... alright?"

He cocked his head slightly. His eyes scanned her up and down, evidently drinking in her appearance.

"Professor... What's wrong? It's me... remember? Caitlyn?"

Surely he hadn't forgotten her. It was only last year that she'd finished her art requirements. One term of drawing and one of ceramics, both with Professor Hennessy.

Finally, he spoke.

"Why do you keep calling me 'Professor'?"

Caitlyn was dumbfounded. The man spoke with Professor Hennessy's voice, but the accent was all wrong. It was English. Professor Hennessy was Irish.

"Er... well... you're Professor Hennessy. The art teacher."

He continued to look puzzled.

"At Hogwarts?" she added.

Suddenly, he began to bellow with laughter so heartily that Caitlyn jumped a little. It was as if she'd flipped a switch and changed his mood entirely. Had Professor Hennessy lost his mind? Perhaps he'd cast some memory charm on himself that made him forget who he was.

"You... you..." he let out through peals of laughter. "You think I'm a professor at Hogwarts? Oh dear, well, I suppose that is a terrifying thought." He wiped away a tear, and his laughter subsided into chuckles.

"Oh, teaching at Hogwarts, that'd be a lark. Did I teach you to wave that little wand of yours in a crisp figure 8?" he asked mockingly. "And did I teach you the difference between the Germanic and Italianate pronunciation of your incantations? Ooh! Does this mean my lifetime ban has been lifted? I suppose there's nobody left to remember that little episode."

He let out one final giggle.

"So, you're not John Hennessy?"

Again like a switch, he suddenly grew serious.

"John Hennessy?" he snapped. "No. My name is John Coventry."

Caitlyn clutched her wand tightly. She watched him carefully, trying to ascertain whether he was lying or cursed. Neither boded well for her.

"If you're not a Hogwarts teacher," she said slowly, still betting that he was probably just a very confused Professor Hennessy, "then what are you doing in the forbidden forest?"

He smiled.

"Well, the portal of course," he gestured behind him toward what was, for all Caitlyn could tell, unremarkable empty space.

"It's good for more than just planeswalking. All sorts of magical energies run through it. Chaotic energies, but powerful if one knows how to work them."

Portals? Planeswalking? Caitlyn stared at the empty spot he'd indicated. All she saw were trees, and the candles that encircled the clearing. She had no idea what he was talking about, but she was only half-listening anyway. She was distracted by his accent. She thought she could detect a subtle undercurrent of Irish, as though Professor Hennessy were still in there, just below the surface.

"How did you get here?" he asked abruptly.

"I was, er, exploring."

"Exploring."

"Yes, sir." She looked down guiltily, but then she remembered he didn't believe that he was a professor, and looked boldly back up at him.

"In the Forest of Lithun?"

"The forest of what?"

"The Forest of Lithun."

"I've only ever heard it called the forbidden forest."

"Ah. That would explain why you look like someone who's been caught doing something naughty."

Caitlyn crossed her arms defiantly.

Professor Hennessy—or John Whats-his-name—smiled.

"You're quite right, young lady. I'm not your professor, so you're not in any trouble with me."

Then he frowned and seemed lost in thought. He began to pace across the clearing.

Caitlyn looked around. Each of the fat candles surrounding them was in an elaborate metal holder that came up to waist height. Peering at the dark earth, she suddenly realized that she was standing on top of a large, complicated design that had been drawn on the ground. She poked it experimentally with the toe of her boot. The soil did not give way as it ought to have. She tried to erase a bit of one of the lines with her foot, but, impossibly, she could not make even the slightest dent or smudge.

"It just doesn't make any sense," he was muttering. "This... it doesn't make any sense."

That was the most sensible thing he'd said so far, Caitlyn reflected.

"Tell me. Your professor," he inquired earnestly, "Did he look like me in the way a brother or a cousin might look like me? Or is he, in fact me?" He pointed to his own face. "Is this the exact face of the man you know?"

Caitlyn nodded.

"You look exactly like him. But you don't talk like him. Professor Hennessy's Irish."

"Hmm. Interesting."

He resumed his thoughtful pacing.

"We've botched rituals before," he muttered, "but never quite like this."

The inappropriate use of 'we' was less disconcerting to Caitlyn than the use of the word 'ritual'. She had heard of cooperative spells, but she'd never heard the term 'ritual' at Hogwarts. Some memory or instinct told her that it was only dark wizards who did anything that might be called a ritual.

"The way I see it, there are at least four possibilities," John suddenly said decisively. "First, there is some twin or copy of me teaching art at Hogwarts."

He began counting on his fingers.

"Second, you are from some alternative dimension where I am a Hogwarts teacher. Third, you are from the future, and I have not yet become your art teacher. Fourth, you are not a real person at all, but just a specter conjured up by my ritual."

"I am a real person!" Caitlyn protested.

"Well, that is what a specter would say."

"You forgot option number five, which is that one of us is completely mental!" Caitlyn burst out.

"Oh no, you mustn't think that way," he replied. "You'll drive yourself mad thinking like that. No, we can rule out your number five." He stared at the ground pensively.

Caitlyn's heart was pounding and her nerves were frayed. She was beginning to think she'd rather take her chances with the wolves.

"Look, Mister, er,"

"Coventry."

"Mister Coventry. I'm sorry I interrupted whatever you were doing here. Could you please just tell me which way it is to the castle?"

"Oh, heavens no, Miss..."

"Holbrook. Caitlyn Holbrook."

"Miss Holbrook. No, you mustn't go. Don't you see, I summoned you here, with my ritual! I can't let you leave until we've sorted out what it means!"

Caitlyn swallowed, and she felt like something heavy had dropped into her stomach.

"What ritual?"

"Why, a ritual to summon my greatest fear. So that I could face it, and conquer it. Only, there's the slight complication that I appear to have summoned you, and I'm not the least bit afraid of you."

Caitlyn stared at him blankly. Who on earth would deliberately summon their greatest fear?

"Now, then," John declared. "One of my four hypotheses is easily ruled out. *When* do you come from?"

She blinked at him.

"Come on," he pressed, "what's today's date?"

"Oh... uh... March 6th."

He gestured impatiently for her to go on.

"1990."

"Oh. My. That *was* easy."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Well, it's currently March 6th, 1863."

Caitlyn smiled. She felt like she was talking to the mad hatter, who was explaining that today was her unbirthday.

"You mean *you think* it's the year 1863."

"No, I mean it *is* 1863. In here, and out there," he pointed into the dark mist beyond the clearing. "Think about it Miss Holbrook, which is more likely, that my ritual summoned you to 1863 or that your nighttime stroll summoned me to 1990?"

"I... well... neither! Obviously," she said, striving to be the voice of reason, "it's just a coincidence that I happened to be passing by while you were doing your... er, fear ritual."

"No, it's no coincidence. I'm too old to believe in coincidences."

"But you'll believe in time travel?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's... oh..." Caitlyn struggled to remember her lessons. "It's one of what's his name... Droessler's unsolvables! Time travel, raising the dead, immortality, and I think there's one more. Anyway, it's one of those things that simply can't be done!"

"I've done two of those three things, why not the third?" John asked playfully.

Caitlyn balked. She felt like her brain was short-circuiting. She was not about to believe that this man, whoever he was, had accomplished things magical research had conclusively proven impossible.

"Apparently, in the future I reinvent myself," John said thoughtfully. "Or uninvent myself, as the case may be. I abandon the English the accent I've worked so hard to acquire, and furthermore I take on the mantle of a wizard. God only knows why. And it still doesn't explain why *you* would be my greatest fear."

"Hang on," Caitlyn said, shaking her head. "You're saying that you're Professor Hennessy, but from 1863? That one day, you'll be him? But then, you'd have been an old man when I met you! You'd have been..." she calculated. "You'd have been about a hundred and fifty years old!"

He smiled, a twinkle dancing in his eye.

"Ah, to be one hundred and fifty again," he said nostalgically. "Those were simpler times."

With a wave of his hand all the candle flames zoomed into the center of the circle and coalesced into a single ball of fire, which hovered beside them around eye level. Caitlyn's whole body tensed. How had he done that? With no words, and no wand!

John turned and began to pull up the expired candles around the edge of the circle.

Caitlyn frowned, keeping the ball of flame in her peripheral vision. He'd said he'd done two of Droessler's unsolvables, and now time travel was the third. That meant he'd managed raising the dead, and immortality. Was he trying to say that he was immortal?

By the thin moonlight and the flickering ball of flame, the whole scene felt unreal, removed from time and space. The trees suddenly seemed to be spinning in a satanic frenzy, and her head was threatening to float away. Maybe she was dreaming. Or maybe this was why the forest was forbidden, because it induces insane delusions. Maybe there was some drug in that mist.

"This is impossible," she muttered.

"That," John bellowed so loudly that she started, "That is how I know you're a witch." He dropped the candles, and the metal holders clanged against each other. Caitlyn shrank back.

"That's the mark of your kind," he proclaimed, approaching her, "It's not the wand in your hand, it's the ideas in your head."

He tapped her temple with one finger.

"This is what they teach you at that pompous wizarding school. Read your books, practice your recitation, close your mind and keep your head down. No sense exploring the boundaries of known magic, because it's all already been discovered. All that's left to do now is carry on the traditions."

He spat off to the side and went back to collecting the candles.

In spite of her desire to get back to safety and sanity, Caitlyn was intrigued.

"What do you mean, 'the boundaries of known magic'?"

The ball of flame between them cast shadows on John's face. To her surprise, his expression was soft.

"My dear, you're looking at them." He smiled and spread his arms wide, gesturing to the entire clearing. "Haven't you ever wondered why the library at Hogwarts has a restricted section? And, for that matter, why the Forest of Lithun is forbidden?"

Caitlyn shrugged.

"Because they're dangerous?"

"You think so? Yet you dared to venture into the 'forbidden forest'. Why?"

She shrugged again.

"I dunno," she said slowly. "I guess I felt like the school must be hiding something interesting. And I wanted to know about it."

He smiled.

"Quite right. Things like this portal," he waved at the empty space again, "are interesting, and dangerous, and are being deliberately hidden. The sorts of things you learn at Hogwarts are only the tip of the iceberg. Chaos magicians are interested in the rest of the iceberg, and for that reason we are labeled criminals and dark wizards. Institutions like Hogwarts and the Ministry of Magic only ever exist for a single reason: to concentrate power in the hands of a select few. Like all authoritarian regimes, they don't really understand what it is they're suppressing, they just know it's dangerous. The question we must ask ourselves, Miss Holbrook, is, dangerous for whom? Think on that. Dangerous for whom?"

He turned to collect the last of the candles.

Caitlyn's frown deepened. She'd never heard anyone talk about Hogwarts this way, least of all an adult. Yet his words rang true. Everything exciting about magic had been tucked away behind locked doors. The best books were gathering dust in the restricted section, leaving Caitlyn to wonder why the only people who are allowed to go there never do.

She watched as John wrestled the last candlestick out of the earth, staggering as it suddenly came free. He did not look like a genius with the powers of a demigod. He was pale and thin, with a patchy beard and chestnut hair in need of a trim. He could not have been older than twenty-five, nor taller than five-foot two. He seemed about as mentally stable as the firelight he summoned. Then again, a lot of history's geniuses had been half-mad, hadn't they? In a way, wasn't madness a prerequisite for attempting the impossible?

"So you really think, I mean, you are... immortal?"

John waved his hand lazily, and the magical symbol beneath their feet disappeared.

"Call me what you like. All I know is, people have been trying to kill me for four and a half centuries."

Caitlyn felt a chill run down her spine, though whether it was the good kind or the bad kind, she wasn't sure. This John frightened her, but she was intrigued by his ideas and intensely curious about his magic.

John stowed the last candlestick and clasped the satchel shut. Then he regarded her with a kindly smile.

"But this is no place in which to have such a stimulating and important conversation. Come with me, Miss Holbrook, back to my home, and we can talk more comfortably. Or you can simply rest, and we'll talk in the morning."

"No. I can't. I need to get back to the castle."

She was still not entirely convinced of any of it. It was simply too ridiculous—that she had accidentally time traveled back to 1863, and run into a younger version of John Hennessy, who, conveniently, had been immortal all along.

"I keep trying to tell you," he replied gently, "it won't be *your* castle. It'll be the Hogwarts of 1863. They'll be strangers, and they'll be of no use to you. Only I can help you, and incidentally, only you can help me, to discover and conquer my greatest fear."

"No! It can't be 1863, it simply can't!" Caitlyn tried not to let her desperation enter her voice.

John took her gloved hand in his cold, bare ones.

"I can't imagine how difficult this must be for you, Miss Holbrook. Growing up amongst wizards, you've been taught to believe in magic, not miracles. But I'm telling you, miracles do happen, and one has just happened to you."

He looked so young, by the flickering firelight. His messy hair curled around his ears, and his smile was watery and lopsided. He really was too young. His cynicism did not match his fresh, exuberant eyes. That discordance, more than anything, convinced her that maybe he really was centuries old.

John's gaze had wandered down from her eyes to the wrist of the hand he was still holding. A chilly bit of skin was exposed between Caitlyn's glove and her sleeve.

Suddenly, his hands sprung to life. One gripped the base of her palm tightly, while the other pulled up her sleeve, exposing her wrist. She attempted to leap back in surprise, but he clamped onto her like cold steel.

"What is this?" he snarled.

On her wrist was a tattoo, intruding upon her arm like a large spider. It was elaborately styled, not unlike the circle that had been on the ground earlier. Characters were embedded within it that might have been letters. Just looking at it induced in Caitlyn a visceral dread bordering on nausea.

"I've never seen it before," she said through her tightening throat.

"DON'T LIE TO ME!" he roared.

Caitlyn shrank back. She tried to wrench her hand free, but John began to dig his fingernails into her skin.

"Stop!" she cried. "You're hurting me!"

She raised her wand with her free hand.

"Petrificus—Aah!"

Her wand burst into flames. She instinctively tossed it aside. It lay on the grass, bleeding flames like an amputated hand. She yearned to lurch forward and stomp the fire out. At that moment, though, John brought his face close to hers, digging his nails still harder into her wrist.

"Tell me the truth," he said through gritted teeth. "What do you know about this sigil?"

"I don't know anything!" Hot tears were forming in her eyes. "I've never seen it before! I don't even know what a sigil is!"

His blazing eyes narrowed, but a moment later he released her hand. She looked desperately at her wand on the ground. With a wave of his hand, the flames went out. Caitlyn dove and picked up the wand gingerly. It was hard to assess the damage in the dim light, but it looked to be only slightly charred. She wasn't sure whether it would still work. Kneeling, she curled her ten fingers around it, as if to soothe its pain.

A moment later, John spoke in gentle tones.

"I'm sorry."

She glared up at him. He was wringing his hands, in a meek sort of way.

"My Irish temper. It still gets the better of me at times."

She rose, wrapping her cloak around herself more tightly and clutching the wand in her right hand.

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

"It's fine," she muttered. She was just relieved that her wand didn't seem to be too damaged.

"What is it?" she asked. "This thing on my wrist."

John took a deep breath.

"My greatest fear."

Caitlyn swallowed. She imagined that she could feel the tattoo—or sigil, as he called it—on her wrist, its evil energy permeating her veins and snaking its way through her bloodstream. She felt violated. How had it gotten there?

“Please, Miss Holbrook, let me take you back to my house.”

“No. I want to go to the castle.”

“But it’s...”

“Even if it is the year 1863!” she cried, stomping her foot. “Just tell me how to go back to the castle!”

John nodded. A ghostly silver dog appeared between them, and it trotted to one end of the clearing.

“The dog will show you the way back to the castle. Just promise me one thing, please. That when the wizards inevitably prove themselves to be both useless and prejudiced, you will come find me, and we’ll sort this out together.”

She strode across the clearing without looking at him. All that mattered was getting away from the mist and the firelight, back to solid reality. However, when she reached the edge of the clearing and the dog began to proceed, she stopped. She called back without turning around.

“How will I find you?” she asked.

“Just go to the town of Coventry and ask for the *former* Lord Coventry. They’ll tell you where to go. And probably warn you not to.”

~

The home of the former earl had been easy to find. It was several miles beyond the town of Coventry. A single house beside the solitary road, it was surrounded by shaggy grassland in all directions. White paint curled away from the wooden siding, more than a few shingles were missing, and the front steps sagged. If the house could speak, it would surely have done so in an exhausted voice.

Its two stories looked commodious for a family, let alone a single person. Aside from this, there was nothing about the house to suggest that its sole occupant had once been among the wealthiest men in England.

Caitlyn lifted the hem of her robe and waded through the tall grass towards the front porch. There was no path. The house was like an island, cut off from the mainland by a stagnant green sea.

She ascended the weary steps and reached the front door. To her left, several tall windows faced an empty front porch. They revealed only the backside of white curtains. She took a deep breath.

A part of her knew that this was foolish. The residents of Coventry had warned her that the former earl was eccentric, at best. He was rarely seen in public, and always with a mask. Some said that after his abdication, he’d gone mad. Others said he’d been mad all along. Some said he was in league with the devil. A few said he *was* the devil.

In spite of all their warnings, she wasn’t afraid. What did she have to lose? She had no possessions. She didn’t even have her wand, which had, it turned out, been rendered nonfunctional by John’s fire. She’d escaped from Hogwarts with nothing but a couple of candlesticks hidden beneath her cloak, which she’d sold for cab fare to Coventry.

It was true that John had a dangerous side—what he called his Irish temper. On the other hand, for the first time in her life, she’d found an adult who didn’t treat her like a disobedient child. If anything, John was frustrated that Caitlyn was *too* obedient. He was giving her permission to be angry—something no adult had ever done. John could teach her things that

she'd probably never get another chance to learn. Not to mention he was probably the only person who could remove the sigil from her wrist and send her home.

The more she thought about it, the more certain she felt. She would have to talk with him, at the very least.

She rapped on the front door three times, hard.

A heavy thump was emitted from somewhere inside the house. There was a muffled clatter of metal. Caitlyn's eye flicked over to the white curtains inside the window, where she thought she saw movement. Moments later, the door flew open enthusiastically.

"Miss Holbrook!"

John's face glowed with unreserved delight.

"Come in, come in!"

She crossed the threshold into the cool, dark house. It stank with a scent like roadkill. It wasn't overpowering, but it was noticeable.

"Let me take your cloak, please."

John whisked her cloak into a closet by the door.

"Can I get you anything? Are you hungry? I hope the journey wasn't too arduous."

She didn't answer. The foyer was spacious, with wood paneling up to waist height, and floral wallpaper above that. Ahead and to her right was a simple wooden staircase that ascended toward an indoor balcony and the second story beyond. To her left was the living room. There, she spied an oddly angular piece of furniture covered with a white sheet. She drifted toward it.

The living room was as old and tired as the rest of the house, but there was something cozy about it, too. There was an unlit fireplace, and a gray sofa whose seams revealed that the sofa had once been blue. There were a couple of armchairs, each with its own side table. Paints and brushes lay strewn on the mantel above the fireplace. Paintings hung on every wall, mostly dull, hazy landscapes.

The odd piece of furniture was an easel. Clearly it bore a painting under its sheet, presumably in progress.

"You really are Professor Hennessy," she said quietly, approaching it.

"Well, not yet I'm afraid."

She could feel him behind her, almost vibrating with excitement.

Dusty sunshine passed through the white curtains, which were looked gauzy and thin. Next to the curtained windows, several feet in front of the easel, was a small table bearing a stained and crumpled cloth napkin.

"Art and magic are the only things I've ever been good at," John continued from behind her. "And music. Anything beautiful that I can create with my own two hands."

She nodded.

"You mentioned once during class that you play the violin."

"I still do. I mean... in the present. Your past."

She turned to him. He was smiling his boyish, lopsided smile. Despite the fact that he was thin, his face had a ruddy, cherubic quality in that moment. Unlike the last time they'd met, it was clean from a fresh shave. Or, nearly. He'd left a pair of thin muttonchops that unmistakably dated him as a man of the nineteenth century.

"Apologies for the smell, by the way," he ventured. "The house has a bit of a mouse problem. Sometimes they, well, forgive the distasteful image, but they crawl about in the walls and occasionally they die there. I tried putting out rat poison to drive them away, but I think I only made matters worse."

Caitlyn nodded distractedly.

If the Professor Hennessy she knew at Hogwarts had known her a hundred and thirty years ago, why had he never said anything? She'd taken his art classes for a year, and he'd never treated her any differently from the other students. Had he forgotten her? Or had he deliberately kept her in the dark? It was hard to believe that he'd lied. He had always seemed so kind.

"You must be thirsty, at least. I'll get us some water. Please, rest, make yourself comfortable."

He turned and receded into the dining room. Almost immediately, he began muttering to himself. Caitlyn strained to listen. She couldn't make out any words, but his tone bounced with apparent delight.

He disappeared into the kitchen beyond the dining room. Caitlyn turned back toward the easel. Without thinking, she pulled the sheet up and off.

John's painting depicted food and drink on a table. It was like countless other oil paintings she'd seen before, with one key difference. All the food on this table was raw meat. At the back of the table was a large trunk of some animal, ribs dripping with gore. Beside it was a golden goblet, with a trickle of blood running down the side, and red imprints from the drinker's fingers and lips. In the foreground was a rumpled, bloodstained napkin. A small platter at the front of the scene proffered a glistening heart. Lying loose on the table, where another painter might have left a clove of garlic or a lemon, an eyeball stared up inquisitively.

The longer Caitlyn stared at it, the more she smiled. Gradually, she began to laugh.

"I don't know how it is in the future," John's voice hissed from behind her, "but in this era when something is covered up, that indicates that it is not intended for exhibition."

"Oh!" Caitlyn cried, still smiling. "I like it! It's funny!"

She stepped back from the painting. As she did so, she noticed that the small table in front of the easel bore a real-life version of the exact napkin that John had painted. It even had the same bloodstains. None of the other objects in the painting were present.

"It's not finished yet," John grumbled as he carefully replaced the sheet. "A lot of details still to be added."

"Well, I like it very much."

"Hmph."

Two glasses of water were on a small table beside an armchair. John picked them up and extended one to Caitlyn.

"So, you're here," he said coolly. "I take it your visit to Hogwarts did not go well."

Caitlyn greedily took the glass and drank deeply. She had not realized how thirsty she was.

"At first, they thought I was a nutter," she admitted, brushing a tangled curl of hair out of her eyes. "Then they saw the sigil, and they thought I was a criminal. They were talking about arresting me for the practice of dark magic."

"Mmm. Sounds about right."

"I tried to explain that I didn't even know what it was."

"I'm sure they didn't know either."

"The headmaster said it was very dark magic, and very dangerous."

John chuckled and leaned one elbow against the back of the armchair.

"That only proves that he didn't have a clue. Most wizards wouldn't know the difference between holy magic and opportunistic magic if it bit them on the arse. That sigil's a holy ward, only dangerous to..."

He paused. He held his water glass so tightly that the knuckles turned white.

"Only dangerous to?" Caitlyn repeated eagerly.

"Never mind." He broke away from the armchair and set down his glass, avoiding Caitlyn's gaze.

"Tell me. Please!"

"No. It doesn't concern you."

"Doesn't concern me?" she cried. "It's on my body, how can you say it doesn't concern me?"

The floorboards creaked as John shuffled restlessly across the living room.

"Trust me, the less you know about it, the better."

Caitlyn narrowed her eyes, and she could feel angry heat coursing through her veins.

"I have a right to know."

"Yes, well," he snapped, "there are other forces at play here besides your rights!"

She gaped. It took her a moment to find her words.

"You know, you really had me fooled," she said, pointing at him with her nearly empty glass. "I thought you were different from the other adults. But you're no different from my teachers, you're just as patronizing—"

"Don't compare me to them."

"Then don't act like them!"

They glared at each other, each looking indignant.

"Can you remove it?"

John's chest heaved.

"Not in a way that's assuredly safe."

"Is that a no?"

"For now."

"So you're saying that you can't help me at all."

He opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it. He suddenly looked more tired than anything else.

"Please, Miss Holbrook. Would you sit with me?" He dragged an armchair close to the sofa and sat in it, then gestured toward the sofa with an open hand.

Caitlyn frowned. From somewhere in the direction of the dining room, she heard a muffled skittering. For a moment she thought someone else was in the house. There was more skittering, and then the sound of tiny feet revealed that it was only a mouse in the walls. She shivered, but then she trudged towards the sofa. She sank into the lumpy cushions, glaring at John.

"I'm sorry," he began. "You're right, I am being patronizing. If I were in your position, I'd be upset, too. The truth is, I don't know where that sigil came from, or how it works. I have only suspicions. And I don't want to leap to conclusions without proper evidence. I think I can remove the sigil, but I need to learn more about it first. I want to draw it, read about it, and conduct some experiments. Then we can talk about what it means."

"I still don't understand why you can't tell me your suspicions," she insisted.

"I assure you I have excellent reasons."

"You mean I'm a silly little girl and I'll just hurt myself if I know the truth."

"I assure you," he repeated slowly, "I have excellent reasons."

She dug her fingernails into the armrest of the sofa.

"I really thought you were different."

John simply sighed, and then shrugged. He did not defend himself.

"How much time do you need?" she asked. "How long will it take to figure out... whatever it is you need to figure out to be able to remove it?"

He shrugged again.

"Weeks, I suppose."

She sank more deeply into the sofa and crossed her arms.

"And then you'll remove it, and then you'll send me back to the future?"

"Nothing would please me more."

"What am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

He leaned back and opened his hands wide.

"Make yourself at home."

She looked around distastefully at the cluttered mantelpiece and the sagging furniture. A pitter-patter above them signaled that the mouse was in the living room now. It began scratching in the ceiling above them.

"Can you teach me chaos magic?"

"What?" John asked, looking slightly alarmed.

"While I'm waiting for you to do your research on the sigil, can you teach me chaos magic?"

"Oh dear," he said, turning pale. "I really have told you too much."

"No!" Caitlyn cried, with such vehemence that she even startled herself.

"You can't do that," she said desperately. "You can't talk of miracles, and the rest of the iceberg, and then take it all back!"

John was growing paler, and his eyes were wide. His gaze was distant, as if he were looking through her.

"No," he said distractedly. "It's out of the question. It's too dangerous."

She could feel her own face flushing, and her nostrils flaring.

"Too dangerous? Who are you, my father?"

"What?"

He was as white as a sheet, and his forehead was glistening.

"What did you say?"

"I said you don't have to protect me, you're not my father," she repeated through gritted teeth.

John shot up out of his chair and began to pace nervously around the living room.

"This isn't about that..."

He spoke so softly and indistinctly that Caitlyn couldn't tell whether he was talking to her or to himself.

"It's got nothing to do with...that... I'm not protecting you, I don't care about you... You're nothing, no one to me... Why should I care... I don't, I don't..."

He had changed so abruptly from composed to shaken that Caitlyn felt a bit rattled herself. Perhaps coming here had been a bad idea. Of course it was a bad idea. She'd known from the beginning that it was a bad idea.

She stood up, too. John didn't seem to notice.

"Maybe I should go," she offered hesitantly. "Just for a—"

"Go?" he asked feverishly.

"No! You can't! You mustn't!" He dashed toward her until he was standing very close. He was wringing his hands.

"Please, Miss Holbrook, stay. There's no need to be hasty."

He extended his hands as if he were about to grab her by the shoulders, but instead awkwardly withdrew them. He gave a strained smile, clearly making a considerable effort to appear calm.

She scrutinized his face. Why was he so desperate to keep her in that house?

That gave her an idea.

"Sure, I'll stay. If you'll teach me chaos magic."

His face fell. He remained pale, and the muscles in his jaw were visibly clenched. Caitlyn waited. The mouse in the ceiling continued to scratch.

John turned and resumed his frenetic shuffling. His brow was furrowed, and he seemed to be thinking very hard. He shook his head several times, in a silent 'no' to a silent question.

Caitlyn bit her lip. She wasn't entirely sure that she was willing to agree to the deal she'd just proposed. Would she be able to live in this strange house, with this strange man, for weeks? But then, what wouldn't she give to learn a kind of magic that was more powerful than anything they'd teach her at Hogwarts! And after all, there was no rush. The twentieth century wasn't going anywhere.

Suddenly, John barked out a single, choking sort of laugh. Then he thrust the heel of his palm against his forehead.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Confused, Caitlyn backed away a couple of paces.

John's head whipped around, and he gazed at her, wide-eyed. Then he took a deep breath.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Fine. I'll teach you chaos magic. On one condition."

She watched him apprehensively.

"You mustn't expect you'll make any progress with it."

"What do you mean?"

He looked down, fidgeting with his hands. Out of nowhere, a white handkerchief appeared between them.

"Chaos magic can't be taught," he said, wiping his brow with the handkerchief. "At least not in the conventional sense."

His voice steadily grew more confident, though he continued avoiding her eyes.

"Wizards believe that anything worth learning *can* be explained in a lecture. They put too much faith in words and concepts. This is one reason they typically fail at more embodied approaches to magic."

She watched him thoughtfully. He ran his fingers through his oily hair, taming it somewhat. Then he returned to his chair and sat gingerly. He looked up at her expectantly.

She took a cautious step toward him.

"I'm not saying I have nothing valuable to offer," he continued, leaning forward onto one arm rest. "Nor that books, lectures, and teachers are valueless. On the contrary, they are necessary. But they can only take you halfway."

Once again, he gestured for her to sit on the sofa beside him.

She hesitated. She glanced at the frayed oriental rug, and then at the crowded mantelpiece. She bit her lip, but then moved decisively toward the sofa. It creaked under her as she sat.

John sank into the armchair with an expression of relief. He even smiled out of the corner of his mouth.

"Now then. Chaos magic has only one rule: there are no rules."

Caitlyn stared at him blankly.

He paused, steepling his fingers.

"The fundamental principle of chaos magic is that everyone must develop their own, unique approach. If a method has worked for someone else, then you may rest assured that it will not work for you, unless you have modified it and made it your own. There are as many paths as there are practitioners. This is one reason chaos magic is so hard to teach. If you try to distill all those paths down to a systematic method, you will get a weak and watery philosophy that suits everyone and transforms nothing.

"All other principles of chaos magic—to the extent that it is a coherent set of principles—are corollaries of this first one. Chaos magicians have diverse views, goals, and methods. The only thing we have in common is our golden rule: there are no rules.

"So, what are some corollaries of the golden rule? First and foremost is a reckless amount of trust. We trust that people, given enough freedom, will naturally become their best selves and do the right thing. Will they make mistakes along the way? Absolutely. Will their mistakes cause harm? Of course. In the end, though, their mistakes are necessary bricks on the road to greater flourishing. And even if they aren't... well, who are we to interfere with destiny?"

"Another corollary of the golden rule is that most chaos magicians dislike the practice of keeping magic a secret. The whole ethos of chaos magic is that anybody should be free to experiment with magic as they wish, so why shouldn't that include muggles? Incidentally, it's my experience that muggles can do magic. People from wizarding families have a leg up, it's true, but anybody can be the first in their family. Many a gifted sorcerer has been stymied by the simple belief that they aren't good enough or gifted enough to do magic."

Caitlyn raised her hand.

John cocked his head, looking puzzled.

Caitlyn put her hand down, and her face flushed slightly.

"Sorry. I was just going to ask what's the difference between a magician and a sorcerer."

"Sorcerer is a general term for anybody who does magic. Wizards and magicians are two types of sorcerer."

"Oh."

She waited for him to resume his lecture, but he merely gazed into the distance, apparently preoccupied.

"I'm sorry," Caitlyn repeated. "I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"I would have preferred if you had interrupted me."

It was Caitlyn's turn to look confused.

"You raised your hand," he pointed out. "Don't. And whatever you do, don't call me professor. I don't think I could stand it. I don't know how my future self can stand it."

"Oh," she looked down at her hands. "I won't do it again. Please go on."

John frowned, and then sighed.

"There's not much more to say, really. You can see why chaos magicians are few and far between. We've little in common to unite us, and the authorities will always despise us. We're not revolutionaries, but we do have an anti-establishment bent. When you accept that everyone must be the steward of their own development, then there is no need for exclusive knowledge keepers, and no justification for meddling laws. That..." he paused, looking distracted again.

"That keeps our numbers low. Among other things," he finished quietly.

Caitlyn held her hand to her chin thoughtfully, considering all he had said.

"But..." she asked slowly, "what does a chaos magician actually *do*? I mean, *how* do you do magic?"

He smiled.

"Trust me, if I had a good answer, I would tell you." Sensing Caitlyn's disappointment, he added, "Books are a good place to start, I suppose."

"Which books?"

He shrugged.

"Any of them, really."

She frowned.

"What do you mean, any of them?"

"If you can truly read any book, it will be an enormous accomplishment," he declared. "After all, it is far easier to write a book than to read one."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

With a twinkle in his eye, he explained.

“To read a quality book of magic, that is, to truly grasp its meaning, is extremely difficult to do. Impossible, for most people. Yet it is fairly straightforward to learn the words, play with them a bit, and then put them into a treatise or book of one’s own. Many people make a career out of doing this. They rephrase old ideas without really understanding them. That is why it does not really matter which book you read. They all mostly say the same things, but very few people truly grasp their meaning.”

Caitlyn did not feel much encouraged. Her reading skills had always been well below average.

“No book can show you your path,” he said, not unkindly. “The point of chaos magic is to think for yourself, not copy somebody else. I could tell you about *my* method, but in doing so, I might be doing you a disservice, because you must develop your own.”

“I want to hear about your method.”

He did not respond, but instead watched her intently. She noticed that his eyes were a vibrant green. Their youthful vivacity was at odds with his pale face, his subdued voice, and his tired house.

He sighed again.

“I will give you a taste of it. But you must remember everything I’ve said about mistrusting authority and finding your own way.”

She nodded vigorously.

He picked up his water glass and took a small sip. He closed his eyes, apparently savoring the liquid. Then, slowly, he opened his eyes and spoke.

“In everyday life, things happen in a very concrete, simple way, and it’s all very fixed. We’re just small things reacting to other small things, producing largely predictable outcomes. We are like little boats, bobbing about at the mercy of the waves. But just underneath the surface, there is a much deeper reality that is limitless, timeless, and unbound. In that reality, all things are already happening in all places and at all times, and they are not separate at all. This reality is about as far from us as the width of a single hair. As a magician, I don’t conjure things. I reveal them. I wave my hand and clear away a little oil from the surface of the ocean, revealing a glimpse of the possibilities below.

“I don’t do magic. I am magic. I let magic show itself, through me. You can *feel* the difference between real magic and Hogwarts magic. Real magic doesn’t feel like you’re performing a practiced routine. It feels like your reality is cracking, and that other limitless reality is gushing up through the cracks. It is a kind of death, and a kind of birth, at the same time.

“As an analogy, consider two musicians. One of them follows the score to a T, executing every note and diacritic perfectly. The second musician mostly follows the score, but adds his own improvisations—extra grace notes and crescendos, exaggerations of the tempo here and there. He sways with the music as he plays. If, when he is finished, you ask him to explain what he changed, he will struggle to recall everything he did. This second musician does not play music—rather, the music plays *him*. He *is* the instrument.

“The first musician has managed to create something. The second musician has managed to reveal something that was already there. This is how the best chaos magicians do magic. Wizards ridicule us because we cannot consistently do simple things like heal bruises, or pick locks, or magically fold our clothes, but we have no interest in dominating magic so that it will do our chores like a slave. To me and my friends, the wand was always a symbol of the wizards’ compulsion to control magic. Underlying this compulsion is fear. Fear of weakness, of humiliation, and of failure. They are so mistrusting of magic that they do not see its true

possibilities. In the end, they are victims of their own fear, for their magic is weaker and more limited than ours.

"I have said that trust is a central preoccupation of magicians. I would stress the importance of trusting magic itself. Sometimes a spell will not work the way we want it to, and we will feel that magic has betrayed us. This is untrue. Magic never fails us. It merely has its own wisdom and its own motives. In working with a power that is wiser and stronger than we are, it is natural that we should, from time to time, feel weakened and confused by it. We must be willing to trust it, even if that means taking incredible risks, or doubting everything we thought we knew. If you feel you are falling apart, or losing yourself, that is a good sign. Trust means knowing a thing is right and true, even if it is also overwhelming, terrifying, and senseless."

He gazed thoughtfully upwards, towards the sunny tips of the curtains. Then he sighed heavily, and his face became serene.

"That sounds more like madness than magic," Caitlyn commented.

"Frankly, the further you go, the harder it becomes to distinguish the two."

She frowned.

"You still haven't told me how you actually *do* it."

He threw up his hands.

"You want exercises? Methods?"

"Yes!"

He sighed.

"Fine. Here."

He picked up his half-filled glass of water from the side table. Out of thin air, a little copper coin appeared between his fingers. He showed it to her, like a muggle magician about to perform a sleight-of-hand trick.

He dropped the coin into the glass. Then he extended the glass to her.

Confused, she took it.

"Now, fetch the halfpenny."

She threw him a skeptical look. He leaned back in the armchair and watched her calmly. Frowning, she looked down into the glass. All she saw was a watery view of the oriental rug below. The halfpenny was gone.

"It's not there."

"Are you sure?"

She huffed with annoyance, blowing a few stray hairs off her forehead. She pushed up her sleeve and reached into the cool water. She stroked the sleek glass bottom.

"Yeah. It's not there."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure!"

"Well, perhaps you shouldn't be so sure."

"This is stupid!" she cried, wiping her wet hand on the couch. "You've said a lot of pretty things, but you haven't told me anything I can actually use!"

"Now listen closely, Miss Holbrook," he said seriously. "I'm teaching you a valuable lesson right now. But you're entirely missing the point of the exercise."

"Which is what?"

"That the exercise is pointless."

Caitlyn wanted to toss the water into his face.

"When it comes to chaos magic," he went on, "exercises don't work because exercises take magic out of its natural environment and attempt to corral it in a safe, controlled one. But

magic must be observed in the wild, in quick, furtive glances. You must surprise it, and more importantly, allow it to surprise you."

Caitlyn felt her face flush beneath her scowl. It occurred to her that this might all be one big practical joke, a lie he was using to avoid actually teaching her chaos magic. It was awfully convenient, after all, that the thing he didn't want to teach apparently can't be taught.

She put the glass back on the side table with a decisive thump.

"Is that it, then?" she demanded. "Is that all you can teach me?"

"No. That's all I can *tell* you, but not all I can teach you. Just because I can't explain chaos magic doesn't mean I can't teach it."

Caitlyn stood. She promptly crossed her arms.

"You know, never mind. Forget it. I was curious, but now I'm just disappointed."

John rose from the armchair, his expression neutral.

"Very well," he drawled. "We'll leave it at that for now. But we both know you're still curious."

He began drifting toward the dining room.

"Cheer up Miss Holbrook," he shouted without turning around. "We'll get you back home as soon as we can. For now, I'll make us some lunch, and then I'll show you to your room."

He disappeared into the shadowy dining room. This time he didn't mutter to himself as he left. Caitlyn began to follow him, but then she paused and turned back toward the glass of water on the side table. She held the glass up to the muted light coming through the curtains. No halfpenny. She swirled the water inside, not really believing that that would help. It didn't. She stared at it in consternation for a moment, and then walked toward the mantelpiece. She pushed a few brushes and tubes of paint aside, creating a little free space. Dubiously, she placed the glass on the mantel.

Then she turned her back on the sunny living room and followed John.

~

More than once, Caitlyn had wondered what history's wealthy aristocrats had done all day to keep themselves occupied. If John Coventry, the former Lord Coventry, still counted as an example of one, then the answer was that they did very little.

He worked on his grisly painting, though he had moved this production to one of the empty bedrooms upstairs. He appeared to spend much of his time reading, but whenever Caitlyn looked closely, she saw that he was mostly just staring into space with a book in his hand. Sometimes he paced around the house for hours. He had a habit of rapping on the walls while he paced, as if the house were a night watchman and he wanted to make sure it had not fallen asleep.

He also played the violin, or rather, he ravaged it. He clearly did not lack technical skill, for his scales and arpeggios were flawless. However, his songs—if one could call them songs—were ghastly. The violin screeched like a dying cat. It was worse than a beginner's playing, because no beginner could construct such finely crafted disasters. His songs were torture with neither redemption nor meaning. Occasionally, a few measures would soar with majestic beauty, and it was like a breath of fresh air for a drowning listener. However, in the next moment, he would systematically dismantle the melody, as if he had only brought it into being for the purpose of dismembering it. If listened to for long enough, the piteous discord could make the listener physically nauseous.

He kept odd hours, and, not wishing to miss mealtimes, so did she. He ate dinner around two o'clock in the morning, went to bed around dawn, and never woke before noon. Most of their waking hours were spent in the dark.

It wasn't true that he was a recluse. He did leave the house regularly, just never during the daytime. Every time he left, he locked Caitlyn in her room with the grind of a bolt and the click of a key. Then he would trudge downstairs, muttering to himself. She felt insulted by the gesture, but not sufficiently insulted to demand that he stop. She spent the vast majority of her time in her room anyway, so being locked in made little difference. She decided to save her goodwill with John for more pressing demands.

Her room contained a bed, a wardrobe, and a dresser topped with a mirror. To Caitlyn's horror, there was a chamber pot beneath the bed, which John had to explain was really only for use when one could not reach the outhouse, and was to be emptied there at one's earliest convenience. She had commented sardonically that the smell of shit might be a relief from the smell of the dead mice in the walls.

To Caitlyn's surprise, the wardrobe in her bedroom contained women's clothes. She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised, since this house had surely been inhabited by more people than just John over the years. Initially, she'd ignored them, but as the days dragged on and her Hogwarts robe festered, she grew curious.

She counted up the dresses, skirts and blouses to find seven outfits total. All of the skirts were enormous, and most trailed on the floor if worn by themselves. They were clearly intended to be paired with the assortment of ruffled petticoats she'd found in the dresser. There was also a hoop skirt frame in the wardrobe. It reminded her of a bird cage. The sight of it made her stomach churn with distaste.

One after another, she tried on each outfit and found it either too large or too small. Only the seventh and final outfit was a good fit. It was a matching set of burgundy skirt and blouse. The fabric was thick and durable, with a muted crisscross pattern. The sleeves could be pulled up above the elbows, which made her feel like a kind of nineteenth century Rosie the Riveter. She stepped back to look at herself in the mirror above the dresser.

As with all of the outfits, she hated seeing herself in it. Hemmed in by the mirror's gaudy Victorian frame, she looked like a trussed up chicken. She looked like a nineteenth century *lady*, the kind of woman who believed in God and wanted children, and who would never fly in an airplane, get divorced, or vote. A thin crack in the mirror seemed to be splitting Caitlyn's image in two.

Suddenly she felt stifled, acutely aware of the weight of all that fabric. The dress seemed to be squeezing her like a boa constrictor, the white collar closing in on her windpipe. Just as she was about to rip it off as quickly as the complicated garment would allow, she noticed something on the front of the dress.

Camouflaged on the burgundy fabric were several brownish spots across the chest. Caitlyn gingerly ran a finger over them. Despite the heat of the stuffy outfit, she felt a sudden chill spread out from those stains. It coursed through her fingers and her chest, turning her blood to ice. She had had enough accidents with her period to know bloodstains when she saw them. However, it was that eerie chill that convinced her beyond a doubt that somebody had died in that dress.

Once again wearing her Hogwarts robe, Caitlyn marched downstairs. She nearly tripped on one step, having failed to see it clearly by the meager light of the candle she carried. Resuming her march a little more gingerly, she proceeded through the gloomy foyer toward the living room.

The oil lamps in the wall sconces seemed to flicker all at once when she entered, as though the room itself sighed at her approach. John was lying on the sofa, staring at the ceiling, an open book face-down on his chest.

"I want some trousers," she announced, setting her candle down roughly on a bookcase. "Men's clothes. Preferably new ones, but I'll take some of yours if that's all you can spare."

John looked up from the sofa with a kind of befuddled surprise. Then he shrugged.

"Fine."

"And another thing. I want a wand."

"And I want a little Shetland pony that will bring me breakfast in bed," he drawled, resting his head back on his pillow.

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

Caitlyn crossed her arms and glared at him. John sighed and sat up.

"What do you need a wand for?"

"I am a witch."

"With no need for magic," he concluded. "If there's anything you need, just ask for it."

"I am asking now."

"Ooh, clever poppet. The answer's still no."

He smiled his lopsided smile, but it was framed by hard shadows.

"What are you so afraid of?" she challenged.

His smile vanished. He stood from the sofa.

"What did you say to me?" he asked in a delicate, dangerous voice.

She hesitated only for the space of a blink.

"I asked you what you're so afraid of. You could easily buy me a wand, but you won't. Why? Afraid I'll run away? Afraid I'll hurt you?"

His nostrils flared, and he took a step toward her. When his foot landed, the whole house vibrated as if an earthquake had struck. The lamps and windows rattled. Caitlyn's breath caught in her throat.

John stalked toward her, and the shaking surged violently with each of his footfalls. She began backing up towards the wall. Paintbrushes rolled off the mantelpiece and clattered to the floor. Books jumped from the bookcase. Something glass shattered, and a painting came crashing down from where it hung. Caitlyn covered her head with one arm as her back bumped into the wall.

Looking down, she saw that John's feet were engulfed in black flames. Her eyes widened as if to reassure themselves of what they were seeing. As John and his fire closed in on her, the skin on her shins dried and crinkled painfully, despite being shielded by her robe. Scorch marks trailed behind him, marring the oriental rug.

Shrinking under her protective arm, she shouted over the ruckus, "You're just ruining your own bloody house!"

The earthquake stopped. Cautiously, Caitlyn lowered her arm. Then she stood up straight. Her defiant eyes met his. John leaned in toward her, until his face was inches from hers.

With a wave of John's hand, the scorch marks, the fallen painting, the books and the broken glass were all neatly repaired. The scene was just as it had been a moment ago, only Caitlyn was flat against the wall, and John's body was almost pressing against hers.

She waited for him to say something, but he simply stood there, radiating heat, his green eyes boring into her. She could smell his stale breath. He reached a hand towards her. Gently, so gently that she barely felt it, he traced her jaw with the back of his index finger. The little hairs on her neck stood up. His hand was warm, but his touch was chilling. Steadily, his finger moved

down to her neck, and stroked her jugular vein. It was pulsating rapidly. What was happening? Vague feelings of horror and repulsion rose in her, but she was too shocked to move. All conscious thought had ceased, and she was simply frozen, trapped under his feather-light finger.

She swallowed.

He stopped.

He turned and glided toward one of the armchairs. He practically melted into it, languidly draping one arm over the back of the chair.

They watched each other for a moment. The invisible ice that had held Caitlyn melted. She stepped away from the wall. Her heart was pounding, and the silence exploded in her ears. Her movements were slow, but she was buzzing with energy.

With a flick of his hand, John produced a glass of red wine on the side table next to him.

A second glass of wine appeared on the table nearest to Caitlyn.

He sipped his wine with lazy movements. He looked like a spoiled prince slouching in his throne.

She looked at the wineglass on the table beside her. It made her stomach turn. Then she looked back at him. He was watching her, slowly tilting his own wineglass in long, slow circles. His face was calm. It was urging her to make a move, yet reassuring her that he was in no hurry.

Caitlyn took a deep breath. She wanted to step outside, to get some fresh air and clear her head. But she would not give him the satisfaction of watching her slink away.

A question rose to her lips.

“What’s your game here?”

“I beg your pardon?” he asked politely.

“It’s been six days now. You said you needed to run some tests, and that then you would get rid of the sigil. But you’ve done nothing. You’re just...” again, the word seemed to rise to her lips of its own volition.

“Stalling.”

John closed his eyes. Then he raised his glass and took a long, carefree sip.

“I’ve been thinking about what tests to conduct.”

“And?” she demanded, daring to take a step toward him. “What have you concluded? What is your plan?”

He looked at her with a raised eyebrow. A maddening smile danced at the corners of his lips. Caitlyn was so tense that she had to remember to breathe.

With a curling index finger, he beckoned her. At first she remained rooted to the spot, trying to decide which was more courageous: to obey him, or to stay where she was.

Finally, she stepped forward.

He put down his wineglass and indicated her wrist.

She offered it. He cradled the wrist in his hands, and to her relief, his touch did not have the same chilling effect it had had moments earlier.

He stroked the sigil as a dermatologist might stroke a skin aberration. He inspected it, prodded it, and finally began muttering.

“Ngurokta khondresh gothanumai, ro hindeke shish kuchek...”

The little vines and characters of the sigil began to dance. A part of Caitlyn felt terrified that John was touching her and she had no idea what he was doing. On the other hand, she was relieved that he was finally doing something.

“Skitsan dowai goshtan du hiruthem, helu konai kondrach.”

The sigil was wriggling, as if it were not attached to her skin but something alive, resting on top of it. Again, she thought of some infernal bug.

“There there, my darling,” he crooned.

Caitlyn started, thinking he was talking to her. However, his gaze was fixed on her wrist. She realized he was talking to the sigil.

"Everyone comes from somewhere." John spoke to the sigil as if it were a little child, and he were lulling it to sleep.

"Tell me, dear heart, where do you come from?"

The sigil suddenly changed from its usual dark brown to white. It glowed with ghostly white light, as pure as moonlight. The light filled the gloomy living room, and then consumed it.

~

It was an unusually beautiful day at Hogwarts. The grass seemed to have grown a couple of inches that morning, the lake radiated happy warmth, and the larks and thrushes sang their approval. The people were shedding their cloaks, blossoming in time with the flowers.

Caitlyn was rushing, looking for all the world like she was late for class. In fact, she had just finished her last class of the morning, and was eagerly striding toward the dining hall. She would ask Rochelle and Abby if they would eat lunch outside today. It was too lovely a day to spend entirely indoors.

She was so focused on lunch that she didn't notice Professor Hennessy on the path until she was nearly upon him. At least, it looked like Professor Hennessy, as she approached the figure from behind. The youngest, and nearly the shortest, teacher at Hogwarts, he had a distinctive profile. Caitlyn, like most of the girls in her year, had not failed to notice the boyishly cute art teacher, and looked forward to taking classes with him.

He was standing still on the left side of the path, apparently thinking, or transfixed by something. Caitlyn moved to pass him on his right, but as she did so, he reached out and grabbed her wrist.

"Careful," he warned.

He pointed toward the ground.

A scaly green band was wriggling across the path. Sweeping her gaze across it, she found its head. The snake was gazing up at her with a large and curious eye. It almost seemed to be smiling. Its jaw was decorated with a vivid striped pattern, which continued down its throat and became a striped belly. It was no lost little baby snake, but a thick, heavy adult, several feet long. However, Caitlyn was not perturbed.

"Oh!" she said. "I've seen this kind of snake near my grandmother's house in the country. Don't worry, it's harmless. It's probably just looking for a place to sun itself."

Motionless, lidless, the snake's gaze was fixed on her. It seemed to be sizing her up. The snake remained still as a statue as the tall grass swayed in the breeze. Its stillness was deceptive, though. It radiated energy. It was like a coiled spring, ready to bolt. Even though she knew it wasn't poisonous, Caitlyn felt unnerved. Finally, apparently satisfied, the snake swept its gaze forward. It slithered on, a mesmerizing ribbon disappearing into the tall grass beyond the path. The grass shuddered, and then became still.

Caitlyn looked down at her wrist, which Professor Hennessy was still clutching. He released it, looking sheepish.

"You're braver than I am," he said quietly.

She smiled, but as she looked into his face, her smile faded. He was very pale, and his forehead shone. He looked terrified. Perhaps he had a phobia of snakes. Caitlyn wanted to say something reassuring without being condescending. Suddenly, she realized that she was talking to the cute art teacher, and her cheeks grew hot. She turned away and hastened to meet her friends.

~

For a moment, neither of them moved. The sigil was no longer wriggling. It had reverted to its usual brown. John Coventry still held Caitlyn's wrist, his face a cold mask.

She had completely forgotten about that day. So that was how the sigil had gotten on her wrist. Or at least, some magic had been placed there that lay latent until she went back in time. Professor Hennessy must have applied it while she was distracted by the snake. He'd probably conjured the snake himself. She'd been a first or second year, still practically a child. For four years, she and Professor Hennessy had shared the same campus. In all that time, he had not only declined to warn her that she would soon be trapped in the nineteenth century, he had actually allowed it to happen.

Suddenly, the wineglass beside John shattered. Caitlyn leapt several feet backward. John was trembling, fists clenched. Heart pounding, mind reeling, she did not linger. She made no calculation of courage and cowardice now, no attempt to persuade or to reason with him. It was as though something inside of her had been sleeping, and it was only now waking up and groggily saying, *Run! Run!*

She strode out of the room without a backward glance.

She was about halfway through the dim foyer when an explosion resounded behind her. She curled her torso inward in a feeble attempt at self-protection. Behind her, she could hear glass showering down like rain. For several seconds she remained like that, huddled, shocked, and confused. Nothing hit her except a chilly draft. Gradually, the ringing in her ears diminished, and she could hear her own labored inhalations.

She turned. The living room was still standing. The furniture, the paintings, all appeared to be intact. She glided sideways, out of line of sight of the doorway. From this angle, she could see the large windows that looked out onto the porch. Triangles of broken glass clung to the frames like jagged teeth. The glass had been propelled outside. The dim light revealed bits of glass twinkling on the porch like deadly snow.

He'd only broken the windows.

Only.

As if he'd only spilled a glass of milk.

She stood where she was. The voice inside that had, moments ago, told her to run, was apparently dumbstruck now.

"Don't."

She could not see John from where she stood, but his voice carried from the living room.

"Don't start."

Caitlyn was bewildered. Was he talking to her?

"This proves nothing."

The cold air from the living room was collecting in the foyer, chilling her and making her shiver.

"I know you're there. I know you're listening."

The chill coursed freely up and down her spine. Should she reply? Should she just leave? She looked up through the gloom at the staircase, while indecision kept her feet pinned.

"What do you think this is," he continued with quiet acidity, "A battle between good and evil? Where you're good and I'm evil? You flatter yourself. You know that I am *not* evil, John, and you are *not* good."

For the second time in a short span, she realized that John was not talking to her. She sighed with relief, and her tense shoulders relaxed. Then she scanned the floor between herself

and the stairs. It would be impossible to cross the decrepit foyer and ascend the ancient, creaking staircase without drawing attention to herself. She bit her lip and remained where she was.

"Don't call me that," he hissed. "I'm not Zkanuthel. Zkanuthel probably doesn't even exist. I'm just you, John. You're just a sad little man talking to himself. And the saddest part is, you know exactly what would make you happy. Why are you so afraid of being happy?"

The floorboards creaked under his feet. He was evidently pacing.

"I want to help you, John. I am already helping you. It's because of me that you're afraid of death, for the first time in ages. Thanks to me, you're finally happy."

Caitlyn's heart was pounding so hard that she was almost surprised John couldn't hear it.

"Don't act like this vision of the future means you've won. The girl is right, you're stalling. The more you try to protect her, the more you endanger her. So why do you do it? I know why. But it's too late to save him, John. You're trying to save the boy, and you're doing it badly."

Caitlyn closed her eyes, focusing on committing his every word to memory. She had heard him mutter to himself before, but she had never heard him this clearly, for this long.

"When will you learn that you can't protect her? Your love is like poison, John. It doesn't matter whether you keep the girl in this house or throw her out. The only thing that matters is whether you let her into your heart. That's what will seal her doom. You think I'm the dangerous one, because I enjoy hurting people? At least I admit that I am cruel. You, John, believe that you are fundamentally good, and that is what makes you dangerous."

Caitlyn felt like her stomach had suddenly turned inside out. Her head felt light.

"Think about it, John. You're making the same choices you made before. This will play out exactly as it played out before. Only unlike the boy's death, the girl's death will have consequences."

The sleepy voice inside her suddenly sprang up again.

RUN! RUN!

She bolted for the stairs. The floorboards screamed at her every step. She didn't care. All she knew was that she had to run.

She flew up the stairs two at a time. Fire sprang up in her thighs with the effort. John stalked behind her with heavy footsteps, and like some kind of fairytale giant.

Caitlyn reached the top of the staircase and bounded into her room with a broad leap. She slammed the door behind her. It did not lock from the inside. Of course, it wouldn't matter if it did. She felt so weak, so naked, with nothing but an unlocked door to protect her from a homicidal madman who could manipulate space and time. She wanted to duck behind something, but what difference would that make?

Unlike the boy's death, the girl's death will have consequences.

His footsteps approached.

Her whole body trembled violently in a kind of macabre dance.

A bolt slid into place. A key clicked. And the giant's footsteps faded down the hallway.

~

As Caitlyn curled up in her bed that night, she was surprised by her own sense of calm. She ought to have been distraught. John Coventry, the only person who could send her back home, was calmly talking about killing her, or at least letting her die. Perhaps the only reason she was alive now was that he was stalling his decision.

And yet the predominant emotion she felt was not fear of John Coventry, but rather anger toward John Hennessy. John Coventry had never really pretended to be anything but a live wire,

at least not for long and not successfully. Professor Hennessy, on the other hand, had manipulated her for four years, pretending to be sweet and gentle when in fact he'd been setting a trap for her. He'd conjured that snake to distract her while he put some dark magic on her wrist. Maybe he'd even been in the forest on the night Caitlyn got lost, ensuring that she made it back to the past. In a way, John Coventry's actions were ultimately Professor Hennessy's fault, because it was Hennessy who'd allowed all this to happen. John Coventry clearly had severe mental health problems. What was Hennessy's excuse? One was a rabid dog, and the other was a fox.

From what she gathered of his conversation with himself, at least a part of John Coventry was trying to protect her. *The more you try to protect her, the more you endanger her*, he'd said. Protect her from what? Himself? Would he really kill her if she upset him enough?

She knew she ought to leave. But where could she go? She could go back to nineteenth century Hogwarts, and try to convince them not to arrest her. She could strike out on her own, but what kinds of options did a young woman, with no money and no friends, have in this era? All of this was assuming she would be able to hide from the most powerful sorcerer she'd ever met, perhaps the most powerful sorcerer who'd ever lived.

There was only one thing to be done. She would stay, for now. She was not ready to give up on getting back home. Underneath John's troubled exterior, there was a spark of humanity that could be reasoned with. She would simply have to reason with it.

It did not occur to Caitlyn to doubt herself.

~

A woman's scream tore Caitlyn out of the mist of dreams. In an instant she was awake, eyes wide, heart pounding, fear needling her head and neck. She felt ready to spring out of her bed, yet she remained where she was, clutching her blankets in sweaty fists. She listened. No further sound came.

Perhaps she'd dreamt the scream. Images slipped through her fingers as she tried to remember her dream. She'd been teaching at Hogwarts in a burgundy dress. Her parents had been seated at the back of the classroom. Quills scratching, hands raised, they'd been asking questions that Caitlyn couldn't answer.

That was all she could remember.

That she'd dreamt the scream was the most logical explanation.

And yet logic was something that Caitlyn had left behind on that night she'd entered the forbidden forest. Perhaps Rochelle had taken logic with her when they'd parted. Ever since that moment, Caitlyn had been groping and squinting in the half-light, searching for something real and steady that wouldn't transform into venom, or crumble into ash. This was her life now, this squinting. It was exhausting work.

Caitlyn wasn't entirely convinced that she wasn't still in that forest, dreaming, high on the swirling mist.

~

The candle on the dresser flickered. Down the hall, the violin screeched its lament. Caitlyn was lying on her bed, idly fingering a shard of glass that had fallen off of her cracked mirror. One ankle rested on the other knee in a figure four position. Her pants—John's pants—didn't reach her ankles, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Her left wrist was also exposed. She'd had the sigil for over two weeks now, but it still did not feel like something of hers. It was foreign and repulsive, like an ugly protuberance of the skin.

It consisted of a series of concentric, spiraling squares, all embedded within a circle. From one of the inner squares, four diamonds burst forth like savage spears. The whole thing was filled with intricate textures, including some squiggles that must have been characters of some language.

The longer she stared at the sigil, the more she was filled with revulsion. John's violin did not help. The violin did not make music. It made pure despair. It was filled with the cries of abandoned children, of the death rattles of people who died alone and became ghosts. The music was crawling over her like an army of sigil-spiders, creeping under her skin, clogging her windpipe, surrounding her brain.

She stared at the sigil with morbid fascination, hating herself for being fascinated by it. The swirling squares were like teeth in an endless mouth. The endless mouth was laughing, taunting her with words she could not understand. What might those words say?

This girl is private property of...

If found, please return to...

Dark witch.

The girl's death will have consequences.

Suddenly, she gripped the shard of glass and struck her forearm, under the sigil. A red scratch glowed angrily, but the skin was unbroken. She stared at it.

The violin paused.

Then, like a snake striking, a noxious chord leapt out from down the hall.

She plunged the glass into her forearm. For a moment, she couldn't breathe. Then, relief washed over her like a waterfall. Blood trickled down her arm, and she felt a tingling thrill all over her body. She tugged on the shard, drawing a horizontal line across her forearm. She bit her lip. Water gathered in her eyes. In all this time, she had not cried once. She had not allowed herself to cry.

A hot tear fell down her cheek. She drew another red line below the first one. This one was easier than the first. The shock lasted only a second, and then she buzzed with electric gratification. She felt miserable, but at least she was in control of her misery. That she had this option, and that she had taken it, made her feel alive. It was a little expression of freedom, however meager. Here, at least, was a dominion of her own, where she was in charge.

She took a deep breath. Thick streams of blood were gushing down her arm. Mercifully, the violin had stopped. And yet the despair did not go away. What did it matter if she bled? If she died? Who would care?

Perhaps she had disappeared from her own time for the past two weeks. They'd have noticed, but no one would care. The teachers would fret because it was their job. Rochelle would fret because they were allies. Her parents would fret because that's what parents do. But none of them would really miss her. She'd been a tolerable burden to them, just as they had all been tolerable burdens to her.

She dug the glass into her arm a third time. A third icy shock. A third clean rain.

The blood formed a network of little rivers. It drenched her sleeve. John's sleeve. When she drew the fourth line, she was sobbing. Quietly. Angrily. She dared the universe to show that it cared. Of course it wouldn't.

Suddenly, the door to her room flew open with a bang. John was striding across the room. In an instant he was upon her, wrestling away the piece of glass. Caitlyn struggled feebly to hang onto it, but her fingers were weak and slippery. He won it easily.

He held up the piece of glass in one hand, and with the other he gripped her bloody arm. "This!" he snarled through gritted teeth, "This ends now!"

He looked like a wild animal, with his tousled hair and muttonchops. He threw her own arm back at her, as if it were a piece of meat. Then he waved the shard of glass before her eyes. "You will never do anything like this again, do you hear me?!"

Caitlyn nodded, too stunned to speak. How had he known?

John straightened up and looked down with blazing eyes. He balled his fists, looking for all the world like he wanted to hit her. Instead, he turned on his heels and stormed out of the room. He slammed the door behind him, and the walls shuddered. He was gone as quickly and forcefully as he'd come.

Caitlyn lay where she was, staring at her trembling hands. She opened and closed them. They suddenly felt very empty. Slowly, she stood and hobbled to the dresser. She pulled out whichever fluffy petticoat was lying on top, and began to dab her bloody arm. She resumed her crying, and this time she did not bother to be quiet about it.

~

The stench was unbearable. It filled the entire house. It filled her mouth so that she tasted it. She wanted to cough and vomit and run away all at the same time. It was like someone had filled a dumpster with shit and rotting eggs, and then left the dumpster out on a scorching summer day, and then closed the lid with Caitlyn inside of it. Most smells can be ignored, after a while. This one was different. Not only would she never be able to ignore it, she would never be able to forget it.

She'd traced its source to the library. It was morning, and the sun provided a feeble ray of cheer to the cluttered, gloomy room. The walls were lined with books in a variety of colors, sizes, and languages. Most of them were about magic. For a man who regarded magic books with some scorn, John owned many. She'd browsed them extensively, but had yet to find one that made any sense at all, let alone held her attention.

Caitlyn stood in the doorway, covering her nose and mouth with her sleeve. She didn't need to remove her sleeve to track the stench. Like a hound on the hunt, she followed the stench to the corner of the library it was strongest.

Tentatively, she approached, looking up and around for whatever it was. Surely the source of the smell would be large, yet nothing looked out of place. There was a bookcase topped with dusty knick-knacks, an armchair leaking fluff, and the floor was carpeted with another of John's large oriental rugs.

Then, one thing caught her attention. Between the rug's edge and the bookcase, there was a pair of warped floorboards sticking out like crooked teeth. Apprehensively, she leaned in.

The smell was coming from the floorboards.

She didn't really need to peek to know what it was. Deep down, she already knew. Of course it wasn't a mouse. A mouse only had so much meat, was only capable of so much rot. Maybe a pile of mice could create this smell. A big pile. But there had probably never been dead mice in the walls, not since day one.

She knew, intellectually, that she could and *should* just turn around, walk out the front door, and leave that house forever. It didn't matter whether she would ever get home, or where she might go next. She'd have a hard life, here in the nineteenth century, but at least she would be alive. Home wasn't worth dying for. Why all this stubborn pride, this insistence that she had it all under control?

But this wasn't really about pride, or stubbornness, or control. It was about the lead in her shoes, the gravitational pull of this house, the fact that she had become a nocturnal animal and her eyes had adjusted to the darkness. That world out there, of shops and schools, dances and weddings, that was for out-there people, real, normal people living real, normal lives. She was no longer one of those people. She was an in-here person, in-here where gravity pulled up and time stood still, and the laws of common sense and human decency didn't apply. She couldn't just leave and rejoin the out-there, any more than a possum could pass for a housecat. She didn't understand it, and couldn't explain it, but she felt a kind of crazed certainty that leaving this house meant death, even though intellectually, she knew the opposite to be true.

Holding her breath, she bent down and dug her fingernails into the gap surrounding one of the loose floorboards. The heavy wood tugged at her fingernails. She slipped her fingers underneath it, and pulled the board up and aside, where it landed with a dull thud.

A cloud of buzzing black flies rose up toward her face. The stench filled her sinuses. She leapt backward, coughing. In a compartment beneath the floor lay a monstrous trunk of dead, rotting meat. It had yellow-pink flesh, which was drying up in places and clinging to the trunk like a gauzy nightgown. Enormous black insects dotted its surface. Some were crawling just beneath the semi-transparent skin.

She held her breath and leaned in for a closer look. The side closest to her was a solid wall of creamy white maggots. Here and there, the meat was dotted with additional pools of maggots. The side pointing away from her looked like it had been blown apart. There were no recognizable structures, just a mass of dried blood, shredded flesh, and bugs crawling on top of one another.

What animal had hairless, yellow-pink flesh?

Unable to stop herself, horrified yet ravenously curious, she dug the toe of her boot under the other floorboard and kicked it up out of the way.

She covered her mouth, an instant too late to muffle the quiet scream that burst out of her.

On the other side of the little compartment beneath the floorboards lay the unmistakable remains of a woman's head. Wrinkled and blotchy maroon, it gazed into the beyond through milky white eyes, like an old crone prophesying doom. Maggots coated the nostrils. Beside it, the first chunk of meat, while still not readily recognizable, bore new resemblance to a heavily mutilated human torso.

A floorboard creaked behind her.

Caitlyn whipped around.

John Coventry stood behind her, smiling a lopsided smile that bore no trace of its former boyish charm. It was an evil smile, as pure as his music.

She suddenly felt very cold. She was sweating profusely. Her lips trembled as she tried to think of something to say.

"Goddamned mice," he said softly. "Stinking up the house."

He waited, eyes dancing.

Caitlyn stood transfixed, trapped between the pit and the devil who made it.

"If I were you," he whispered, leaning in conspiratorially, "I'd go to my room now."

He flashed her a playful wink.

Caitlyn dashed past him and through the door. She hurled herself from the library, toward the stairs, avoiding any backward glance toward John or the corpse. All the while, she felt his eyes on her, holding her as tightly as a pair of hands.

~

Caitlyn spent that evening in bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. She felt an impulse to move, to *do something*, but she didn't know what. Her limbs were anxious, but her mind was sluggish.

The fact that John was hiding dead bodies in the house didn't really change anything. At least, not right now. Maybe she'd feel differently later. Maybe she'd feel anything later. Right now, she couldn't feel, or think. Her mind was a restless fog. Trying to hold onto a thought was like trying to hold water in a sieve.

She didn't care about food. Nor would she have been able to read a book. She had the chamber pot. That was enough.

She didn't even care when John locked her in her room.

She rested, fluttering in and out of awareness without alighting on sleep. The head under the floorboards would not let her sleep. Again and again it returned, crying out for help without moving its bruised lips. *I'm sorry*, Caitlyn told it. She didn't know what she meant, but she also didn't know what else to say.

Only when she heard voices downstairs did her groggy mind begin to stir.

She opened her eyes. The moon bathed the room in silver light. Her eyes wandered around the room, landing on the cracked mirror, and then on the drinking glass on the dresser.

It was the glass into which the halfpenny had disappeared. She'd saved it during her first night here. The water had long since evaporated, yet she'd hung onto the glass—as a reminder, or a challenge.

Downstairs, a woman laughed.

Caitlyn sat up. She pushed a few frizzy curls behind her ear and listened carefully. It was muffled, but she could hear a woman talking to John in easy tones.

Caitlyn kicked off the cocoon of blankets in which she'd tangled herself. Her bare feet landed softly on the cool wooden floor.

The voice downstairs was light and animated. Caitlyn thought of the head with its milky eyes and maggoty nostrils. Had that woman also laughed at John Coventry's jokes?

Mechanically, she moved through the chilly air towards the closet, and began putting on some pants.

Only once she was fully dressed did she remember that the door was locked and bolted from the outside.

She flopped back onto her nest of blankets, shivering. John and the woman continued their muffled conversation. John's voice boomed jovially, and the woman laughed a vivacious, tittering laugh.

Caitlyn suddenly felt hot. Her jaw clenched. The injustice roiled in her gut like a snake. Half of her wanted to disappear into her blankets, while the other half was frothing with rage. She couldn't just lie here while John got away with murder. How many people had he killed since she'd moved in? At least one—the night Caitlyn had woken to the sound of a scream. And then there were the seven dresses in the closet, of a variety of shapes and sizes. One from each victim? How else to explain the odd assortment of clothes, including the blood-spattered blouse?

Her anger was bubbling up to the surface. It was not the familiar anger *at* someone. All her life, she'd been angry *at* her parents, *at* her teachers, *at* all the authorities who had told her what to do. This was anger *for* someone. Anger *for* every woman who'd ever been locked into her own home, charmed into trusting the wrong man, brutalized because he regarded her as only half-human. For how many centuries had women been forced to endure mistreatment and humiliation? For how many centuries more would they have to wait, while change progressed an inch at a time?

She suddenly flew out of bed and hurled herself at the door. Her shoulder collided with it, knocking against the solid wood. She cradled her forearm while bolts of pain shot down her arm and up her neck. She grabbed the doorknob and rattled it uselessly. Of course, it was locked.

"Alohomora," she cursed through gritted teeth. "Alohomora, Alohomora."

The little doorknob did not budge. The unlocking charm was useless without a wand.

"FUUUUUCK!" she cried.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

She kicked the door several times with her bare foot.

"JOHN COVENTRY! YOU LET ME OUT OF HERE YOU BLOODY SON OF A BITCH!"

She pounded on the door with her fists. She clenched and unclenched them, wishing she had a battering ram so she could break down the door. Panting, she glanced wildly around the bedroom.

She spotted the empty drinking glass on the dresser. Resentment spread through her like venom. Too angry to think, she flew towards it, gripped the cool glass in her right hand, and hurled the glass at the door. It exploded with a stellar crash. Bits of glass fell tinkling to the floor. Amid the delicate echoes, she heard a tiny grinding sound that was not glass. She looked down, confused. The grinding became a wobble, and then concluded with a tiny thud.

Her eyes searched the blue floorboards, which now twinkled with silver glass. Moonlight glinted off of a tiny dark disk. It was the halfpenny.

She blinked down at it, too stunned to react. Then, carefully, she bent down and picked up the coin. To her surprise, it was hot in her hand.

She listened for John's footsteps, for the woman's laughter, for any sound at all. No sound came. The silence rang out like an alarm.

Reckless courage rose up inside of her and roared like a valiant lion. She looked down at the ocean of broken glass at her feet. Then she looked up at the locked door. An idea struck her. She knew it was foolish, but she would never forgive herself if she didn't try. She had to trust in magic. And if she ended up with a thousand shards of glass in her feet, that would not mean magic had abandoned her. Success lay in her willingness to trust magic, not her ability to control it.

She closed her eyes.

"Alohomora," she whispered breathlessly.

She hurled herself forward in a gigantic stride. In one fluid movement, she leaned her tender shoulder into the door, turned the knob, and opened it. She immediately thrust her foot down into the hallway in front of her, just managing not to trip. Then she brought her back foot forward, avoiding the broken glass entirely.

She stood in the hallway for a moment, letting her heart flutter. Despite the throbbing of her shoulder and the pounding of her heart, she allowed herself a smile. But there was no time to revel in her success.

She proceeded down the hallway, scarcely daring to breathe. The floorboards creaked under her. She moved close to the wall, where the boards were stiffer, and tiptoed as delicately as she could. Nevertheless, the house continued to creak and strain under her, sounding her presence like a weary but loyal watchdog. Soon she abandoned the effort to walk quietly, and flew down the stairs.

When she entered the living room, she found John standing over the couch. He was shirtless, and hastily pulling on a pair of pants. A body was lying on the couch.

Caitlyn dashed toward it and roughly pushed the half-naked John aside.

The woman on the couch stared up at the ceiling with glazed eyes. Her dress had been torn open. So had her chest. Her breasts lay at odd, horizontal angles, and the white bones of her

ribcage were exposed. Caitlyn couldn't make out the heart, but she was pretty sure that if it had been beating, she'd have noticed movement in that red cavity.

"My my, Miss Holbrook," said a voice from behind that made her skin crawl. "If I'd known you were so eager to join the fun, I'd have brought home a second girl for you."

She whipped around. John had thrown on a shirt and was beginning to button it. There was no blood on his hands. He was smiling coyly.

"Fix her," Caitlyn demanded, trying to keep her voice steady.

He merely continued buttoning his shirt.

"Fix her!"

"What, you mean bring her back to life?"

"Yes!"

"Ah, why didn't you say so? After all, Miss Holbrook, she's not a broken toy."

He finished the last button. Then he looked at the woman on the couch, interlaced his fingers, and began chanting some repetitive phrase. He moved his hands smoothly in and out of several interlocking positions. Caitlyn looked back at the body. An intricate symbol appeared on the woman's chest. Parts of it glowed white, and parts glowed black. The symbol twirled and writhed. Then it disappeared.

The woman lifted her head a couple of inches. She opened her eyes wide and let out a choking gasp. Suddenly, she uttered a shriek that pierced Caitlyn's eardrums. Caitlyn and John both winced. The woman glanced wildly between the onlookers and her own mangled chest as she continued shrieking.

Horrified, Caitlyn looked at John. John was just standing there, cringing a little, but the ghost of a smile still lingered on his lips. Caitlyn waited for him to correct his mistake, but he made no move to do so.

"I meant *heal* her!" Caitlyn shouted over the wrenching shrieks.

"Oh!" John shouted casually. "Why didn't you say so? No, that's not possible."

The woman on the couch was clasping at her chest, pitifully trying to put the mess of skin back together.

"What do you mean it's not possible!" cried Caitlyn desperately, looking back and forth between John and his hysterical victim.

"Never had a knack for healing," he shouted over the shrieking. "Resurrection's easier because there's still a bit of necromancy to it, you see. And I could self-heal, if I ever needed it, with blood magic or left-hand magic. But healing another person solely for their benefit? That's pure holy magic. I've no aptitude for that sort of thing."

Caitlyn balked. The woman on the couch made jerky, twitching movements, and her screams became a kind of rhythmic scream-panting. Her ragged chest rose and fell. Caitlyn felt her own heart struggling to leap out of her chest. Her whole body seemed light and distant, as if it were running away from her.

"Do something!"

"What do you propose, Miss Holbrook?"

Caitlyn felt like pulling out her own hair. Surely she was dreaming. But she couldn't be dreaming, because the woman's shrieks were like spikes drilling into her ears.

"Anything!"

"You'll have to be a little more specific!"

"Make it stop!" Caitlyn put her hands over her ears. She could feel water stinging her eyes. The woman on the couch had rolled onto her side, and she was groping the floor with her fingertips. She was trying to get off the couch.

"Make it stop!" Caitlyn repeated desperately. Tears streamed down her face and snot gathered in her nose.

"How?" he drawled.

Suddenly, his intention dawned on her. There was only one thing to be done, and John would make her say it. Caitlyn felt herself sinking into the walls, into the floor, melting away. Between the woman's noise and her own inner panic, she couldn't think. The next words out of her mouth seemed to come from far away, as if she'd left her brain on top of a bookcase on the other side of the room.

"Do it!"

"Come again?"

"Kill her!"

John waved his hand carelessly, and the shrieking stopped. The woman's eyes closed again. She sagged, still lying on her side.

Caitlyn backed away unsteadily. Every bone in her body was urging her to flee, back to the safety of her bedroom. She took one last look at the woman on the couch. Flaps of flesh dangled from her chest, spilling vertical streams of blood onto the couch. Her arm protruded straight out, limp fingertips grazing the rug.

Caitlyn turned and moved toward the stairs with heavy feet.

"Leaving so soon?" John inquired. "Even after you went to the trouble of a little chaos magic to get down here?"

She turned, alarmed. Meanwhile, John's smile had changed. The playful trickster's smile had been replaced with something warm and genuine. He smiled like a proud father. Caitlyn thought she might be sick.

"I promised I would teach you chaos magic, and I am. You see, I keep my promises."

Dazed, she turned and continued shuffling toward the stairs. She wasn't capable of running. Even walking felt strange and unfamiliar. John's voice called out behind her.

"And here I was beginning to think that you and I had much in common, Miss Holbrook!"

~

Eventually, Caitlyn was bound to go downstairs to get some food. Twice she had slunk into the kitchen while John was upstairs, to grab fistfuls of bread and cheese. But when the smell of garlic, herbs, and roast chicken wafted up to her bedroom, and her stomach growled angrily, she began to consider that sooner or later, she would need a real meal.

After all, if she was just going to hide in her room, there was no point staying in John's creepy murder house. The whole point of staying had been to urge him to send her back home. That was still the plan, she supposed. Though it seemed wrong that her plan should remain unchanged by the revelation that he was a serial killer. Was it selfish of her to care only about getting home? Should she also try to stop him from killing? No, of course not. She was no hero. She was a mere student, and the worst in her class. She would be lucky just to make it home.

Moving groggily down the stairs and toward the kitchen, Caitlyn felt she was crossing a threshold from one world to another. Behind her was cold, stiff, silence. The kitchen ahead radiated warmth and invigorating aromas. John was whistling merrily.

When Caitlyn poked her head around the open doorway, she half expected to see John butchering a woman's body. Maybe he'd be preparing fillet of breast, or roasted ass, with an eyeball garnish, like in his painting.

Instead, he was chopping an onion.

He stopped whistling and looked up. His face was ruddy, and his eyes glistened from the onion.

"Now there's a sight for sore eyes!" he cried with a broad smile. "Come in, Miss Holbrook, don't be shy!"

Caitlyn took a small step forward, but then she leaned against the door jamb lightly, ready to bolt at a moment's notice.

"You're in a good mood," she commented.

John beamed in her direction, and then continued chopping.

She watched him suspiciously.

"Why?" she asked.

"Do I need a reason?" he replied cheerfully.

In this hell hole, yes, she thought.

John was standing at a table in the center of the kitchen. His side of the table was littered with spices, herbs, bowls, and utensils. Across from him, on the side of the table nearer to Caitlyn, were a couple of empty chairs toward which he gestured now.

"Come. Sit. I won't bite."

Caitlyn wasn't so sure. Still, she was so hungry that she decided it was worth the risk. She drifted toward one of the empty chairs and sat down.

He was gingerly slicing the onion into ribbons. She watched anxiously, taking shallow breaths. It was oddly comforting to watch his fingers perform the mundane little task. She tried to recall if she'd ever seen either of her parents chop an onion by hand. She couldn't.

"You don't even try to do it by magic?" she asked.

John shrugged.

"Sometimes I do. But I have an intuition for when magic wants to be used, and right now, I don't think it does."

He continued to work in silence. When he finished slicing the onion, he gathered up the thin slices in both hands and turned around. Using a pinky finger, he pried open the creaky oven door. He tossed the onions into the dish inside, and then closed the oven with a clang. Then he moved toward the window and wiped his hands on a rag. Leaning against the counter, he stared out the window. Neither of them spoke for several minutes.

The sun was setting on the vibrant green field outside. Shadows painted the grass, imbuing it with depth and texture. Birds soared across the clear blue sky, occasionally diving or making sharp, powerful turns. Maybe those birds had spotted some invisible prey. Or maybe they were showing off to the nearest female. Or maybe, Caitlyn thought, they just enjoyed flying.

These were 19th century birds, she reflected. These birds had died more than a hundred years ago. Did that make it a privilege to be able to watch them? Did it matter at all? They looked perfectly ordinary. Maybe birds were birds, in any century.

"You've never asked me about the future," she said suddenly.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, looking at her with genuine surprise.

"Most people, if they've got a time traveler in their house, sooner or later, you'd think they'd ask her what the future is like."

"Oh."

"Aren't you curious?"

"Not particularly."

Caitlyn watched him skeptically as he moved back to his cutting board and began plucking a sprig of herbs.

"A lot of pretty incredible stuff happens in the twentieth century."

"Mmm-hmm." He continued plucking without looking up.

"You really don't care?"

"Thousands of years ago," John drawled, "a wise man said, 'There is nothing new under the sun.'"

"Yeah, well that wise man didn't live to see all the stuff that happened between the years 1863 and 1990."

"Let me guess," he sighed. "America freed the slaves. Women got the vote. Wars got bloodier, the rich got richer, and technology can do all sorts of things we never would have dreamed possible."

Caitlyn blinked.

"Well," she said gruffly, "I suppose those are the highlights."

John smirked.

"People don't change. They just find new ways of doing the same things they've always done."

He scooped the herbs into a little bowl.

Caitlyn absently ran her finger along the table, tracing the grain of the wood.

"You changed," she said quietly.

She snatched an anxious glance up at him, but he was merely watching her with a raised eyebrow.

It was overwhelming, trying to reconcile her memories of Professor Hennessy with the facts that had come to light. At first, she had been convinced that Professor Hennessy was a cruel, cunning, schemer. A monster in a lovable disguise. Now, though, she was not so sure. Professor Hennessy was a liar, certainly. But John Coventry's dark side was *so* dark. So sick. Sickness like that is hard to hide.

"You were good and kind in the future," she said. "Not like now. Even when you're pretending to be good now, I can still smell the evil on you, like the smell of death on this house."

John merely chuckled.

"Ah, conviction. The gift and curse of youth. I wonder, Miss Holbrook, how well did you really know me?"

He smiled out of the corner of his mouth as he glided toward the oven. He turned his back to her, and she almost didn't catch his next words.

"I assure you, your professor has not stopped hurting people. He has merely stopped enjoying it."

A chill ran down Caitlyn's spine. Doubt tugged her in two directions.

John bent down and opened the oven again. For an instant, Caitlyn imagined shoving him into it. She was stuffing him inside with a broom handle. His face was turning beet red, while he squealed for mercy. She ignored his pleas, and slammed the oven door on his wriggling fingers.

An instant later, she was stunned by the violence of her own imagination.

John grabbed a couple of rags and pulled a pan of roast chicken out of the oven. He set it on the stove, where it radiated delicious heat.

He closed the oven door and turned to her.

"Is this why you're still here?" he asked. "Because you think you can change me into the good man you remember?"

Caitlyn looked up at him, but then quickly averted her eyes from his intense green ones. Was that her reason?

"Yes," she said confidently, without meeting his gaze.

"Hmph," John grunted. "Didn't your mother ever teach you it's a fool's errand to try and change a man?"

"My mother mostly told me to stay away from men."

“Ha!” John barked. “Even better. Smart woman.”

He fetched two plates from the cupboard, and then stirred a pot on the stove that Caitlyn hadn't noticed. He scooped something white onto the two plates. She thought of brains and eyeballs. A second look revealed that it was mashed potatoes.

“How many women have you killed?” she blurted out.

John looked at her. He seemed startled, but not displeased.

“They weren't all women.” He shrugged. “And I've lost count.”

“Why do you kill them?”

“Because it pleases me.”

Caitlyn gripped the edge of her seat.

“Why do you keep their bodies in the house?”

“Occasionally, I use them in rituals. Mostly, though, I simply fancy souvenirs.”

He spoke in a spirited voice, as if they were discussing the prospect of taking a walk in the park, or buying new shoes.

“Why can't you just... you know, pretend to kill them?” she asked desperately. “Find a prostitute who will pretend to die?”

“I used to. Then one night, it didn't end well for the poor girl. I still use whores, but I'm not content to play pretend.”

She gripped her seat more tightly. Her hands were sweating profusely. Fear coursed through her veins, but she was bursting with curiosity.

“Why haven't you killed me?”

John froze. He had picked up a fork and a large carving knife, and now he held them suspended above the chicken. He spoke icily, through gritted teeth.

“I assure you, I have excellent reasons.”

Caitlyn wanted to insist on a better answer, but she sensed that she was steering into dangerous waters. So she said nothing, and watched with dismay as he began carving into the meat. Methodically, he doled out pieces of it onto their plates.

He sprinkled some of the herbs from the bowl onto each of their plates. Caitlyn watched hungrily. She was mere moments from being able to scurry away upstairs with her plate. Still, she racked her brain for anything that might stir his conscience.

“I'm not even sure that I have to change you,” she said obstinately. “I already know that one way or another, you will change. And not just because I'm from the future. I know it because good always triumphs over evil, in the end.”

John smiled serenely and proffered her plate.

“I'm sure that's a great comfort to the girls beneath the floorboards.”

~

Three days slipped quietly into nights. John did not bring home another woman, nor did he lock Caitlyn in her room. Every time she heard his footsteps in the hallway, her taut nerves grew tighter and her heart raced, yet he would pass over her like the angel of death. In this way, they sustained an uncomfortable kind of peace.

Her mounting anxiety was consuming her from the inside. She tried not to look at it. She felt like she was brushing it under the rug, and every time she thought about lifting the rug and taking a peek, she only generated more anxiety, and swept that under the rug, too.

She couldn't go on like this. Whether it came from her or from him, something would have to give. She almost wished that he would attack her. Then, finally, she could leave knowing that

she'd done absolutely everything she could have done to get back home. But it felt wrong to leave now, when he was docile and lucid, reassuring her that he just needed a little more time.

She was not staying, but waiting. She was crouching among the bushes, surveying the battlefield to which the enemy would be arriving at any moment.

On the fourth night, she crept downstairs for a snack, thinking John was in his room. She carefully padded down the dark staircase, guided by her little candle. As she rounded the bottom of the stairs toward the kitchen, she heard a scrape, and then a thump. It came from the pitch-dark living room.

"Miss Holbrook?"

Caitlyn froze like a deer in headlights.

Footsteps creaked toward her. Slowly, a figure materialized out of the darkness.

"Miss Holbrook. I... was just thinking of you... and now here you are," John spoke with a kind of amazement, as if it were the most uncanny coincidence that they should run into each other.

Caitlyn eyed him closely in the flickering light. He bore no hint of a smile, and there was no devilish gleam in his eyes. His hair and clothes were disheveled. He was pale, and wide-eyed. If she didn't know any better, she'd have said he looked frightened.

She felt light on her toes as she waited. Her body was tense, like a drawn bow.

"Yes, yes," he said furtively. "It must be now. Miss Holbrook, you must go now."

His tone continued to sound surprised. He looked down at his hands, which were trembling.

Suddenly, he lunged toward her. She stepped backward, but he took her free hand in both of his. His hands were limp and clammy.

"You must go!" He whispered feverishly. "He's coming!"

Frightened, she wriggled her hand out of his feeble grasp.

He suddenly flew past her, down the dark hallway, towards the back of the house. She stared after him, her mind whirling. Was this another trick, like the woman on the couch? Caitlyn's heart was pounding so hard that her whole chest throbbed with the effort.

Off in the darkness, there was a rustling, then a slam that might have been a drawer closing. A moment later, hasty footsteps approached.

"Here, take this."

John re-materialized out of the dark and shoved a leather satchel into her free hand. It was spilling over with cash.

"It's money. Lots of money. Take it and go."

The bag was surprisingly heavy, for one that contained only bills. Caitlyn didn't even need to see the denominations to know that she was holding a small fortune.

"Go! While you still can! It's not safe for you here, do you understand?"

He took the candle from her hand and set it down on a table. She was too stunned to resist.

Again he strode past her, now in the other direction, towards the front door. In the dim candlelight, she saw him throw open the coat closet and pull out the heavy outerwear she'd been wearing on the night they met in the forest.

Carrying her clothes in a pile, he strode back to her. He shoved a pair of shoes into her hand, and then threw her cloak around her shoulders. A glove nearly tumbled to the floor as he thrust a sweater into her arms. Once she had all her clothes, he gently pulled her towards the door.

"He's coming..." he was muttering. "It's not safe. Go, somewhere far away..."

"But... what about..." she stammered.

He threw open the front door. A chill wind slapped her, and her mind cleared a little.

"But I want to go home!" she cried.

John looked at her with sad, pleading eyes.

It suddenly occurred to her that this might be a valuable chance to get the answers she'd been waiting for.

"Can you remove the sigil?" she demanded.

"No," he said flatly.

"No, as in never?"

"No one can remove it. Your professor sealed it with a *finem fati*. It will disappear once it has served its purpose, and no sooner."

She took a sharp breath of cold air.

"What do you mean, once it's served its purpose? What is its purpose?"

"I can only guess."

"Then guess!"

John hesitated, grimacing. Caitlyn watched him anxiously.

"To save your life."

Caitlyn gawked at him. She had a thousand more questions.

"Can you send me back home?"

He nodded, twitching.

"Then do it! Do it now!" she insisted.

He shook his head and spoke in a whine.

"I can't do it without him."

"What do you mean you can't do it without him? Without who?"

John opened his mouth, but then closed it again. He didn't really need to answer. On some level, they both knew what he'd meant.

He put a hand on her upper back, and guided her towards the door. She stepped across the threshold onto the porch. A breeze nipped at her nose and ears. She was still only wearing her socks. The cloak was sliding off of one shoulder. She turned around.

A part of her did not want to leave, now that he was being good and honest. She wished he could stay this way. But he wouldn't. She was confused about many things, but not about that.

"What does the sigil mean?" she asked.

He looked at her with a pained expression. A bead of sweat glistened on his pale forehead.

"Go."

"Please, just tell me—"

"Go!"

He slammed the door. For a minute she simply stared at it, shocked. As she gazed at the solid barrier, the finality of his action slowly sank in. It was as if he had closed the door on her former life. On Rochelle, on Hogwarts, on her parents. She looked at the crack beneath the door. Where she might have expected to see light bursting through, the crack only cast a shadow. It was as if black bile was creeping out from the bowels of the house, only to dissolve in the bright moonlight.

Clumsily, she shoved her feet into her shoes. She fumbled to put on her sweater, while the cold air crept down her collar and under her shirt. She searched the pockets of the sweater and found her scarf. Its familiar softness was reassuring in her unsteady hands. She swallowed, turned, and hastened down the steps. As she did so, she put on the scarf, tightening it a little harder than she meant to.

~

It must have taken her well over an hour to walk to the town of Coventry. Or it might have been more than two hours. Or it might have been only twenty minutes. Her boots, padding quietly on the brick road, provided a sense of time, but only from one second to the next. Tick-tock, they whispered. It was late, and the town was asleep. All was still and silent, except for Caitlyn, drifting through the streets like a ghost.

The tall buildings cast long shadows in the moonlight. Caitlyn looked up at the signs as she passed. GROCERY. TAILOR. EBNER'S BAKERY. FINE CABINETS AND FURNITURE. They loomed above her in tall, capital letters, barking their services into the night.

She was looking for the police station. Did this town even have one? Did police stations exist yet, in 1863?

THE HEARTH AND HOME INN

She paused beneath the wooden sign. Even in the shady moonlight, it was visibly dirty. Her gloved fingers stroked the leather satchel full of money. In the ground-floor window was another, much smaller sign. SWAN'S FLIGHT FINEST WHISKEY.

She took a step back, looking up at the inn from the middle of the street. Its second and third stories jutted out above the first story like an overbite. All the windows were dark.

HEARTH AND HOME

Caitlyn felt a sudden wave of sadness roll over her like a tide. It battered her sides and entered her belly like water sloshing into a boat, drowning it very, very slowly.

HOME

Was home a place? Or was it a feeling? In either case, this inn wasn't it.

She kept walking.

Tick-tock.

Knees grinding, feet throbbing, she continued down the empty streets, looking left and right for a police station, or even for a lighted lamp.

STANTON SONS LAW OFFICE

Again, she stopped and peered into the dark windows. A law office was sort of like a police station, right?

Of course, it wasn't. And even if this were a police station, with a lamp in the window and a friendly officer behind the desk, what would she tell him? Would she tell him of magic sigils and time travel? Would she tell him how she had retreated to her room again and again, knowing there were dead women in the house?

Whether she went to the inn or the police station, she would have to lie, or at least leave out bits and pieces of the truth. No one—not even wizards—would ever believe her story. And it would be that way for the rest of her life.

She felt like she was carrying a black hole in her stomach, and it was sucking all of the light and hope from the world.

As she stood before the law office, despair pounding her like a storm, she gradually noticed a noise in the distance. From behind her came the faint but unmistakable sound of a horse's hooves.

She didn't turn around right away. She let the hoofbeats grow faster and louder. Their unsteady rhythm was somehow soothing. If she could simply stop time, in that moment, she would be content to listen to the hoofbeats for hours.

With a sinking feeling, she turned around.

A rider was approaching on a dappled gray horse. They wore some kind of mask or scarf that covered most of their face, and a hood that covered their head. Only the eyes were exposed. Tension rose in Caitlyn's body as the stranger approached, like a screw twisting into wood.

Then she remembered what the townsfolk had told her, when she'd first arrived and asked about the former Lord Coventry. They'd said he'd worn a mask in public for the last twenty years, following an accident that had left him disfigured. She'd forgotten about it entirely. Now it dawned on her that he did indeed hide behind a mask, though not to hide any disfigurement, but to hide his unnatural youth.

She sighed with relief as she sized up the rider's small stature, and assured herself that it was indeed only John. Then she felt disgusted with herself for feeling relieved.

As he came closer, the tension within her became more palpable. With every step John was invading her space, smothering her, engulfing her. She felt a feverish urge to run, yet her feet were bolted to the ground.

"Miss Holbrook!"

The words made her shiver as if someone had poured ice down her shirt.

The clip-clop of the horse's hooves slowed, and then ceased.

"I fear this is all a terrible mistake. Please don't go. Come home."

Under her cloak, Caitlyn hugged her own ribcage.

"Which John am I talking to?"

John hesitated. The horse fidgeted under him, its eyes wide and wary.

"The happy one," he answered with levity.

A chill coursed up and down her spine. She felt light-headed.

"You don't belong out here, Miss Holbrook. It's not safe."

Resentfully, she glared at him. How dare he kick her out because she wasn't safe, and then beg her to come back home for the same reason?

"I'm not going back to that house just so you can keep stalling and doing nothing!"

John paused again. It was hard to know what he was thinking as he towered above her, hidden behind the mask.

"Very well," he said sharply. "I'll send you home. Tomorrow."

"No! Send me home now, or leave me alone, forever!"

John let out a frustrated grunt. The horse looked around nervously.

"Fine, we'll do it tonight. But at home. I'm not doing a ritual in the bloody town square."

Caitlyn was too surprised to speak for a moment. She hadn't expected him to be so willing. Would he really send her home tonight? She trusted the nervous John far more than she trusted the happy one. Still, he was finally offering her what she wanted. She hadn't waited this long only to turn him down.

She thought for a moment, then said, "Swear it. Swear you'll send me home tonight."

"I swear it on the graves of my children," he said solemnly.

The oath startled her, but then she nodded. She supposed it was as good a promise as she could ask for.

She took a backward glance at the dark law office. Its stony face was unchanged. Then she looked back at John, and her eyes flicked down to the horse.

"I didn't know you have a horse."

"I don't. I have magic."

Caitlyn blushed, feeling foolish. Of course he didn't have a real horse.

He dismounted, and gestured for her to climb into the saddle. She hesitated. She'd only ridden a horse a couple of times in her life, and never for very long.

Apparently sensing her hesitation, he took a step towards her. Caitlyn swiftly brushed past him. She thrust her left foot in the stirrup and heaved herself upwards. She wobbled, and, afraid of falling, set her right foot back down. Ignoring John, who was leaning in to help, she managed to climb onto the horse with her second attempt.

She'd assumed John would walk beside the horse as she rode it home. Instead, he walked around to the right side of the horse, where Caitlyn was still struggling to insert her foot into the other stirrup. He took the stirrup from her, stepped into it, and gracefully mounted the horse behind her.

Her whole body tensed as his pelvis pressed into the back of hers. He wrapped his arms around her and took the reins. She grasped the horse's shoulders, for lack of anything else to hold. Again, she had the feeling of being engulfed, and an anxious alarm bell inside her warned that John was much too close. But as he flicked the reins and the horse began to canter with surprising speed, the alarm bell grew fainter. Her whole body relaxed. Her hands slipped from the horse, suddenly clumsy. She sank into John's arms, and darkness obscured her vision.

~

Caitlyn woke in her own bed.

Not my bed—she thought, grimacing—*just the one I've been using for the past few weeks.*

She bolted upright into a sitting position. The room was dark but for the pallid moonlight. How had she gotten here, and when?

She leapt out of bed and raced toward the door. Furiously, she jiggled the little Victorian knob. It was locked. She delivered one hard kick to the door with her bare foot.

Downstairs, a woman yelped.

Caitlyn froze, confused. She had lived this moment before. She looked at the top of the dresser, searching for the empty drinking glass. She needed to smash it against the door, to step over the shards, to save the woman downstairs. But... she had failed that woman. Twice. Now here she was, a third time, about to fail again.

Caitlyn shook her head. No, she reassured herself. This was a new moment, with a new woman. But she couldn't entirely shake the feeling that she was standing in two realities at once.

The last thing she could remember was getting on the horse. She'd been tired, but not sufficiently tired to fall asleep so quickly, and on horseback at that. That could mean only one thing. Instead of sending her home, as he'd promised to do, John must have cast some kind of sleeping spell on her, locked her in her room, and brought home another victim. Caitlyn trembled with rage. Her field of vision contracted, as if she were looking through a narrow pipe. She struggled to focus on the doorknob in front of her.

Alohomora.

She tried the knob again.

"Alohomora," she said aloud.

Several more times she tried, without success. She cursed chaos magic under her breath. She was on the verge of attempting to batter down the door, as she had on that previous night, when she abruptly stopped herself.

John and the woman downstairs were conversing. They spoke unhurriedly. Caitlyn's kick had apparently been rationalized and forgotten.

Caitlyn slumped her forehead against the door, and her eyes nervously fluttered shut. She remembered how, on that other night, the laughing woman downstairs had fallen silent as soon as Caitlyn had begun shouting and making a ruckus. Maybe John had killed her as soon as she'd realized that somebody was trapped upstairs.

Caitlyn shuddered. She needed a better idea, and quickly.

She felt the bed tugging her away from the door, beckoning her into its weary embrace. She was so tired of this awful house, tired of feeling somehow responsible for the deaths that occurred under its roof. Everything about it—the stench, the colors, the fabrics, the flickering oil

lamps, all of it made her feel sick. Worse than that, it made her feel small. Hogwarts had never had that effect on her. She'd prowled that campus like a hungry tiger that couldn't be caged. Here, in this house, she was more like a mouse, caught in a trap she didn't understand, built by creatures far bigger than she.

She turned away from the door and looked longingly at the bed.

How had this happened? How had she become this tired, miserable creature? Only weeks ago, she'd been exploring the forbidden forest with eager exhilaration. She'd had such energy, a ravenous curiosity that couldn't be contained! She had not consented to lose that energy. And she was not going to let John take it from her. She would not go down without a fight.

Her eyes rose from the bed to the window beside it. She began calculating. The window looked big enough.

"Guess I'll just have to break out the old fashioned way," she muttered as she approached it.

~

Caitlyn was breathing hard when her bare feet finally touched the soft earth. Keeping her body low and her head bowed, she swiftly crept along the perimeter of the house. Then she crouched behind the bushes, and peered through a living room window. John and the new woman were on the couch, kissing passionately. John was shirtless, running his hands through her long, tousled black hair. The woman was wearing some kind of undergarment that had been pushed up, revealing her bare body from the waist down.

Thorns gently clawed at Caitlyn's pants as she unconsciously leaned in. She backed away. Her throat tightened as she glanced back at the window, recalling the exposed organs of the dead woman on the couch.

She tried to sense, as John had once put it, whether magic wanted to be used that night. If only she could do a little magic, she could distract him and save the woman. The violin, maybe. No, that might rouse the woman's suspicion. A storm, or an animal? That might work. But if she couldn't pick a lock, how could she possibly hope to conjure a storm?

John pulled the woman's last bit of clothing over her head and off. Caitlyn averted her eyes. There wasn't much time.

She stepped to one side of the window, out of its sights. The square beam of light emanating from it projected vague, formless shadows onto the grass.

She directed her gaze toward the back of the house, and the kitchen. Then she clenched her jaw and tried to summon a fire, as she had seen John do so many times.

"Incendio," she whispered.

She glared intently at the spot she wished to ignite. After a minute, she was trembling from the effort, and she felt dizzy. Nothing was happening. The lovers in the window continued to frolic.

She took a deep breath. As she exhaled, she felt more steady on her feet. The earth supported her like an even, solid pedestal. Her spine straightened. Time slowed. It was as if, by the simple act of breathing, she had conjured more time.

Her haste suddenly seemed absurd. This woman had already died a hundred years ago. Even if Caitlyn saved her tonight, she would still die eventually—soon, really, in the grand scheme of things. What was a human life to the rivers, to the mountains, to the universe? It was as fleeting and forgettable as a single exhalation. This woman was nothing, and certainly she was no one to Caitlyn.

Caitlyn took a long, steady breath in.

That whole evening, a battle had been raging within Caitlyn, and now she was beginning to see the face of her foe. Resignation had been beckoning her back to bed with a subtle word and a sultry veil, but Caitlyn had been tearing through it with her sword. She would not give up. This woman's life mattered. Every life mattered, including this strangers', and including, for that matter, her own.

Again she inhaled, and her chest expanded proudly. Oxygen filled her muscles, and they felt charged with power.

Suddenly, it was obvious what she had to do.

She exhaled carelessly. As she did so, she raised her right hand toward the back of the house, and snapped her fingers.

A crash resounded through the still night. Several thuds were accompanied by a cascade of crashes. Wood breaking, dishes shattering. Something holding dishes or glasses had collapsed spectacularly.

Caitlyn was again reminded of that other night, when she had stood in the hallway, halfpenny in hand, open door and shattered glass behind her. Then, too, she had been triumphant. Then, too, she had been too anxious to enjoy her triumph. That evening had ended in disaster. This one wouldn't.

She looked up at the window. John, who was wearing only his underwear, was striding out of the room, motioning for his quarry not to follow him.

Caitlyn dove onto the bushes, hardly noticing the thorns, and threw up the window sash. The woman on the couch whipped around. She gazed at Caitlyn with the eyes of a frightened doe. Then she groped towards the floor and fetched her undergarment. She held it like a small blanket, modestly covering herself.

Caitlyn beckoned her with a vigorous gesture. The woman knitted her brows warily. Desperate, Caitlyn continued to wave frantically with both hands.

"Please," she whispered from the window. "Hurry!"

Cautiously, the woman stood. She looked around, and then crept toward the window with tentative steps.

"He's going to kill you!" Caitlyn hissed once the woman was close.

The woman froze, and her face became hard.

"Come on!" Caitlyn urged. "He's done it before! He'll do it again!"

Caitlyn held her breath as she waited for the woman to make her choice. Luckily, it didn't take long.

The woman slipped on the linen chemise she was holding, and then stepped through the window. Caitlyn lent her a hand. The next thing they knew, the woman was leaning on her. Their bodies pressed together as Caitlyn tried to shuttle her above the thorny bushes.

As soon as the woman's feet touched the ground, Caitlyn began pushing her away.

"Go! Run!"

The message had been received. Caitlyn sighed with relief as she watched the woman's back recede into the night.

Caitlyn knew she ought to be running, too. Her mind suddenly leapt to a reality where she ran after the graceful, doe-like woman. Together, they escaped death's clutches and returned to the woman's humble home. Caitlyn explained that she had nowhere to go, and the woman understood, welcoming her like family. After all, they were sisters in a man's world.

Instead, Caitlyn watched as the chemise became a white speck in the distance. Then the speck became a mirage, a fleeting suggestion of what might have been.

She turned back toward the window. Suddenly, something invisible grabbed her wrists and pulled her violently toward the light. She was jerked up and over the bushes, which tore at her

skin. Her stomach flipped as she soared through the living room. Then she landed into some piece of furniture head first. Waves of pain rippled down from the crown of her head. For a moment she knew nothing but agony, twisting and stabbing at her brain.

Her head throbbed, growing and shrinking with every heartbeat. Gradually, shapes and colors appeared in her vision. Something hoisted her up. It was clutching her limbs, and pressing into her torso.

Caitlyn closed her eyes. When she opened them again, everything was upside down. John was carrying her. She raised her head, but pain shot down her neck. John grunted. She was lying across his shoulders, as if John were an ox and Caitlyn were his yoke. His hands clasped one of her arms and one of her legs.

With every ounce of her recovering strength, she struggled against his hold. She pounded her fists into his thighs. With her free leg, she aimed several kicks at his knee. She tried to lift herself off of his shoulders, and to wrench away her caught limbs.

In response, he pressed her torso more roughly into his shoulders. For such a small man, John was surprisingly strong. He clenched her arm and calf tightly, digging his nails into her skin. Her kicks grazed off his knee without striking true.

Head and neck still aching, she swung her head up and bit his ear. John screamed, but Caitlyn remained clamped onto it firmly. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth.

Something hard collided into the back of her head. Her already tender skull exploded with fresh pain. She let go of his ear and momentarily collapsed against his shoulder. John had stopped walking. They were halfway up the stairs, gasping. The posts supporting the handrail obscured her vision like prison bars.

The back of her skull rent her brain with angry tugs. The throbbing pain of a few moments ago returned with a vengeance. He must have conjured something that hit her from behind. What was she thinking, trying to fight him? It was utterly pointless. He had magic. Or as he put it, he *was* magic. Even if she'd had her wand, she would still be no match for him.

Caitlyn was suddenly filled with a despair so profound that all her energy seemed to drain out of her body. Futility gripped her like a drug, pulling her out of this reality. She was powerless. There was absolutely nothing she could do to stop him from getting his way.

John resumed walking, and she dangled across his shoulders limply like a mink stole.

Turning sideways so they would fit, John thrust himself into her bedroom. He threw her onto the bed roughly. She flopped onto it with a feeble bounce. John swayed unsteadily for several seconds, scrunching his eyes shut.

She willed herself to get up, but she could not. So she concentrated on just raising herself up onto her elbows. The elbows moved themselves, sluggishly, moments after she had instructed them where to go. They obeyed, but more like lazy servants than like a part of her own body.

The room was chilled by the cold air coming through the open window. In the sterile moonlight, the furniture, and even the air, looked dead and frozen. She felt strangely light, even lighter than the cold, dead air around her.

John opened his eyes and looked at her hungrily. He was shaking with rage. His ear was drenched in blood, which flowed down his neck in rivulets. He roughly placed one knee on the bed, and then straddled her as easily as he'd mounted his horse.

His face contorted into a snarl.

"You owe me a body," he whispered through gritted teeth.

You promised, she wanted to say.

He pushed her collarbone down with one hand. Her elbows gave way, and she collapsed onto the bed. The sensation felt delayed and distant, like she was watching it happen to someone else.

She commanded her body to move, but it was like trying to command the moon. Her body had become a puppet. She didn't know who was holding the strings, but it wasn't her.

Caitlyn understood exactly what was happening. She knew that her blood was coursing through her veins like a stream of angry fire ants, and her heart was wrenching her entire body as if fighting to escape her chest. She knew that John was pulling up her shirt, grasping her torso in his clammy hands.

She knew everything, yet she couldn't think. She felt everything, yet she couldn't move. All she could do was wait for it to be over. In a way, she was grateful for that. She didn't have to be afraid anymore. The worst was already here. Apparently, when pushed far enough, even fear itself can surrender, giving way to a grotesque serenity. All she felt was the cold, dead serenity of a ghost, looking on down on a grave robber as he rifled through her tomb.

~

When Caitlyn woke, there were bars on her window.

She couldn't remember falling asleep. For hours after it was over, she had simply lay there, trembling, praying he wouldn't come back. She'd felt certain she would never sleep again. Obstinate, she'd fought against sleep, as if to make up for her failure to fight against John.

But somehow she had slept. Deeply and dreamlessly, for the sun was now high in the sky.

There was something violent about the way the sunlight penetrated through the bars.

She pulled the blankets over her head. Her nose dripped, and she wiped it on the sheet that covered her face. She'd cried herself to sleep, and now her sinuses felt congested. Her vagina throbbed painfully.

There were voices downstairs.

Not again, she thought. Not another victim.

Her brain, her vision, everything seemed to be shrinking in on itself, contracting to a pinpoint in front of her nose. She felt a sudden, powerful longing to be dead. Hell could not be worse than this. She couldn't take it anymore, this strange, rubber reality where time stretches and snaps and occasionally folds over itself.

She tried to tune out the voices below, but they drifted up through the floorboards of her fragile sanctuary.

It was not a woman this time. These were men's voices, and they were shouting. Dimly, she wondered what they were shouting about, and why they could not do it somewhere else.

Feet pounded up the stairs. Caitlyn's heart raced. It had never occurred to her that the heart could feel tired of pumping, in the same way one's legs can feel tired of running, yet her heart felt that kind of fatigue now.

The voices were muffled, but she began to make out words.

"... *my* bedroom?"

"It's not *your* bedroom. If it is, then Croome is *my* house."

The floorboards announced heavy feet approaching down the hallway.

"... never put bars on the bloody windows at Croome."

Someone knocked vigorously on the bedroom door.

Caitlyn bolted upright in her bed, and gathered the blankets tightly around her. She clutched the fabric tightly, willing the men to go away.

The bolt slid aside. The knob rattled. There was a pause.

"... pointless... she'll tell you."

The key turned, and the door opened slowly.

In the doorway stood a young man. He was probably in his late twenties, a little older than John. He wore a crisp suit and held a top hat in his hand. He was tall and thin, with a prominent nose, and dark shadows beneath his eyes.

He opened his mouth to speak, but then hesitated, as if suddenly abashed.

John lingered behind him like a shadow.

“Come, Henry, you’re only upsetting her,” he said, pulling on the tall man’s arm.

Henry shook him off like a pesky insect.

“Are you here of your own free will?” he demanded, looking directly into Caitlyn’s eyes.

Caitlyn was speechless. It had been so long since she’d talked with another human being besides John, that, for a moment, she was afraid she may have forgotten how to do it.

“Look at her,” John hissed. “She doesn’t want you here.”

John tried to step in front of Henry, but Henry shoved him aside. The two men glared at one another. Then Henry turned and spoke firmly to her again.

“Do you want to leave this place? With me, now?”

Caitlyn gaped at him. Who was this person? Could she trust him? Then again, could she afford not to?

“Enough of this,” said John. He reached in front of Henry and grabbed the doorknob. He started to close the door, but Henry stopped it with his foot.

“You... ” Henry said icily to him. He shoved John again, harder this time, so that John stumbled backward into the hallway. Henry turned his back on Caitlyn. He and John regarded each other in tense silence.

Caitlyn shoved her blankets aside and got out of bed. Her clothes were disheveled, but she was fully dressed in a shirt and pants. She ignored the burning in her crotch as she walked toward the door.

“I’ll go with you,” she said quickly. She focused on Henry, avoiding looking at John.

Henry looked surprised, but nodded.

“Collect your things. I’ll wait.”

“I haven’t got any things. Let’s go. Now.”

Caitlyn suddenly felt a visceral urgency to be out of that house. The present moment felt like a drawbridge that was closing, and she had mere seconds to clear the gap.

She forced her way past Henry, into the hallway, and towards the stairs.

John uttered a guttural growl.

As Caitlyn turned to look at them, a ball of flame appeared before John. She watched in horror as it careened toward Henry, who was backing away. Henry raised one arm to protect his face.

In the blink of an eye, something white flashed in front of Henry, and the hallway filled with the scent of smoke.

“Run!” Henry shouted over his shoulder.

Caitlyn sped down the stairs. Behind her, she heard a sound like crashing wind, followed by a thump that might have been a body falling.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and flew towards the coat closet by the door. She flung it open, scanning it for her shoes. There was another thump. She glanced back up at the men. Henry was crumpled at the top of the staircase, and John was stalking toward him. She silently urged Henry to get up. Clumsily, he staggered to his feet. He took one step toward John, who carelessly flicked his hand. Some kind of black stone materialized beside Henry’s head, and then pounded into it. He tumbled down the stairs like a heavy rag doll.

Despite the urgency of her escape, Caitlyn couldn't look away from Henry's body as it slid down the stairs, slowing until it came to a halt on the bottom steps. She stared at the motionless, sprawling mass. John was gliding along the balustrade, like a shark at the water's surface.

Henry stirred.

Caitlyn looked frantically back at the closet. She didn't see her shoes, so she gave up and made for the door. She threw it open and stepped outside, but then turned and waited on the threshold, peering back into the house.

Clinging to the railing for support, Henry lurched upward, and then finally stood. John was looking down on him disdainfully from the top of the stairs.

John narrowed his eyes, and then whistled.

A pack of dogs charged toward Henry in all directions. The first one to reach him sank its teeth into his arm. In the next instant, however, Henry waved his free arm, and purple mist swirled around him. The dogs stopped in their tracks. They looked this way and that, milling about as if suddenly blind.

Caitlyn's eyes grew wide as she comprehended what she was seeing. Henry was fighting back with his own chaos magic!

John let out another savage cry. He raised one arm, extending his pointer finger upward. Impossibly, a row of archers appeared on the balustrade—tall, burly men in white cloaks, with hoods that covered their faces. John swung his arm downward, like a conductor summoning a furious chord. The archers released their arrows.

Caitlyn cringed behind the open front door. Several arrows struck the interior of the house with loud thwacks. A moment later, the door was thrust open. She stumbled backward, waving her arms to keep her balance. Then the door slammed shut, and Henry was next to her, slumped against it at an awkward angle.

His nose was streaming blood, and the gory head of an arrow protruded through one shoulder. For a moment, she thought he would die, right there in front of her. But he remained upright. After a few ragged gasps, he took a step away from the door, swaying dangerously. She quickly moved to support him, wrapping his good arm over her shoulder. Gingerly, they walked down the front steps. When they reached the grassy earth, Henry paused, panting. Caitlyn looked back up at the front door nervously.

"Don't worry," he reassured her hoarsely. "If we're leaving, it's because he's allowing us to leave."

She nodded, but her muscles were tense. She imagined John bursting through the front door at any moment, coming to rip open their chests and play with their dismembered bodies.

After a moment's pause, they began wading through the grass, towards a small carriage with two horses which waited by the side of the road. Caitlyn barely noticed the sticks and stones that poked her bare feet.

When they reached the road, Henry pulled away from Caitlyn's shoulder. Slowly, with mechanical movements, he took a couple of steps on his own. Then he ascended into the carriage, and gently lowered himself into the seat.

Once assured that Henry did not need help getting in, Caitlyn walked in front of the horses and hoisted herself into the carriage from the other side. The carriage was small and simple. It consisted of a padded leather bench that could seat two or three people, and a stretched leather roof that reminded her of a convertible car.

She looked at Henry with concern. His head was bleeding as well as his nose, and a bruise was forming under his right eye. He was sitting on the edge of his seat, his eyes closed. The arrow in his left shoulder rose and fell as he breathed.

"Can you drive?" he croaked.

Caitlyn stared blankly at the reins draped over the front of the carriage.

"I don't know how."

"You can learn. It's easy." Henry opened his eyes, and looked down toward his shoulder.

"But first..."

He began gingerly fingering the head of the arrow. With his good arm, he reached over and behind his shoulder, to the back of the arrow. He probed the wound with his fingers. Then he clasped the arrow, wincing.

Caitlyn looked at him with alarm as she realized what he was trying to do.

"I don't think that's a good idea!" she cried.

Henry grunted, grimaced, and then released his hold on the arrow.

"I can't do it."

He groaned with frustration. He moved to clutch his ribs, and then straightened himself up stiffly.

"I just need to lie back and rest, but I can't with this..." he nodded toward the arrow.

"I think we should find a doctor," Caitlyn said.

"I can't ride like this. Please, I hate to ask, but..."

He looked her up and down. He seemed to be trying to assess what kind of girl she was. Caitlyn suddenly felt self-conscious, with her bare feet and John's disheveled clothes.

"Could you do it?"

Caitlyn frowned. Apparently he'd decided what kind of girl she was.

"Can't you heal it with magic?"

"I could try, but if something goes wrong, the consequences could be disastrous. I'd rather not take the chance if I can avoid it."

Her eyes flicked from Henry to the house, and back to Henry. She could feel John watching them. She wouldn't be able to relax until they were far away.

"Please," Henry begged.

Caitlyn bit her lip, but then she leaned toward him. She gripped the back of the arrow with one hand, and braced his shoulder with the other. In unison, they each took a deep breath. Then she yanked back on the arrow as hard and fast as she could. She could feel it tearing new tissue as it came free.

Henry let out a muffled scream without opening his mouth.

Caitlyn released him, clutching the bloody arrow.

Henry whimpered a little as he leaned against the padded backrest. He reached into his coat and produced a yellow handkerchief. Then he slid his hand under his coat and pressed the handkerchief into his shoulder wound.

"Thank you," he said weakly.

Caitlyn let the arrow fall between their feet with a clatter. Then she picked up the reins.

"Just give them a few good raps with reins and the whip." he said, closing his eyes again. "I'll shout to them, they know my voice."

She looked down at their feet. Next to the arrow was a thin rod with a leather loop at the end. She picked up the whip and waved it through the air experimentally. Then she took one last look at the house before setting her gaze forward. She flicked the reins, and brought the whip down firmly on each of the horses in turn.

"Hup, hup, yah!" Henry called.

The horses stepped lightly, the carriage jerked forward, and then they were bouncing down the dirt road to Coventry. Deep down, Caitlyn erupted with delight. She was leaving! For good! Her life, her body, and her future were all ruined, but none of that mattered right now.

Right now, the sun was shining, the birds were twittering, and she was free. John had not won, at least not completely.

She flicked the reins again, and the horses sped up into a jaunty trot. A joyful breeze tousled her curls. The fresh air renewed her from the inside out. She smiled. She couldn't remember the last time she'd smiled!

She rapped the horses with the whip, again, and then once more. The carriage jolted roughly beneath them, jerking left and right as if trying to eject them.

"Woah, hey, woah there!" Henry called to the horses.

"Pull back a little. You'll tire them."

Ruefully, Caitlyn tugged on the reins. The carriage ceased jerking and resumed a spirited bounce. One of the horses huffed peevishly.

"John's never done anything like that before," said Henry distantly. "He tests me, sometimes, but that was no test. That was... I don't know what that was."

Caitlyn didn't reply. She had no idea how Henry and John knew each other, and she was afraid to ask. She did not want to poison the present moment with thoughts of current and future dangers. For just one moment, she wanted to imagine that she was safe.

"Anyway, the important thing is that you're safe," Henry continued, as if reading her thoughts. Caitlyn fidgeted in her seat, putting a few more inches between them. Henry was still leaning against the backrest and nursing his shoulder, but his voice sounded strong, even cheerful.

"Well, that was an unconventional introduction. How about a more conventional one. May I know your name?"

"Caitlyn. Caitlyn Holbrook."

"Ah, what an interesting name. Pleasure to meet you, Miss Holbrook."

"Caitlyn," she declared swiftly. "My name is Caitlyn."

"Uh... right," said Henry, sounding confused.

"Call me Caitlyn."

"Oh. Well, then. I suppose we are dispensing with convention today. In that case, you may call me Henry."

He extracted the handkerchief from his shoulder and wiped his upper lip, attempting to mop up the blood coming from his nose. Then he replaced it and cleared his throat, as if trying to think of something to say.

Caitlyn looked straight ahead. Whatever Henry asked, she wouldn't want to answer. She didn't want to have to explain herself. She just wanted to watch the horses' heads bob, and listen to the wheels grind on the dirt road, and maybe throw back the shady covering over the carriage, to feel the sunshine on her skin.

As the horses' hooves clip-clopped with a steady rhythm, she was reminded of John's horse, approaching her outside the law office. Had that only been last night? It seemed like a lifetime ago.

Suddenly, Henry sighed.

"I suppose it wouldn't do much good to apologize on behalf of my father."

"Your father?!" Caitlyn exclaimed.

"Unfortunately."

Caitlyn gaped. She felt the urge to scream, to run, to throw something at him. Once again, her triumph had been spoiled almost instantly. John Coventry's son! She'd hardly made any progress at all! She'd fallen from the frying pan into the fire. She looked at him again, and suddenly the resemblance was striking. At first she'd only noticed his lanky, hawkish figure,

which was unlike John's, but now she could see that he had his father's chestnut hair and vivid green eyes.

"I'm not like him, though," Henry said quickly.

"You do magic like him."

"Yes, well..." he conceded, "I didn't have much choice in the matter."

Caitlyn scowled at the horses ahead of her and gripped the reins tightly. She wished that she were alone.

"We were never close," Henry said softly over the gravelly rasp of the carriage's wheels.

"He was always irritable. Ungenerous. Then, one night, when I was eleven years old, something inside him broke. He lost his mind. He set the house on fire, and nearly killed my mother. After that, we left—my mother, and brother and I. When we occasionally returned to Coventry for visits, we stayed in that house, rather than the family estate."

He gestured behind them with a flick of his head.

"I didn't speak to him for ten years. We're on speaking terms now only out of necessity. But I assure you there is no love between us."

Caitlyn looked at his bloodstained clothes and face.

"That much I'll believe," she said grudgingly.

"I only came this morning because I received word that he'd put bars over one of the windows. Naturally, I rushed over to investigate. And I daresay I'm glad I did."

Caitlyn glared at him resentfully. She wasn't his damsel in distress to rescue. She would have left the house for good that very day, anyway. She was sure of it.

"Please, tell me what I can do for you. You would certainly be welcome at Croome, that is, at my home, if you need a place to rest."

Caitlyn's gut roiled at the thought of being cooped up with another Coventry.

"I don't want to go home with you," she snapped.

Henry looked affronted.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked.

"Do you know who I am?" she parroted in a mocking tone. "You're your father's son, that's all I need to know. He's a monster, and maybe you are, too. I don't trust you."

Henry looked away. A flock of geese began honking overhead, filling the thick silence between them.

"Very well," he said stiffly. "Then I will see to it that you arrive safely wherever you wish to go. Where will you go? Have you any friends or relations nearby?"

His question struck her heart like an icicle.

"I haven't got any friends or relations," she said bitterly.

Henry frowned.

"Where is your home?"

"I haven't got one."

"Then, where will you go?"

She said nothing, but tightened her mouth into a thin line.

"Well, what'll it be then? The workhouse? I can't rightly leave you in the gutter, now can I?"

Caitlyn's head swam. For a few glorious minutes, she'd been happy and free. Now Henry had managed to shove her freedom back into her face. She had nothing, no one, no future. Not even a pair of shoes. Her body had been snatched away from her, and she was still branded like a cow with her sigil. A minute ago, she'd even thought she might have made a friend, but that had been snatched away from her, too.

Tears suddenly gushed from her eyes as if a dam behind them had burst. She choked on her own breath as despair tightened her throat. The next thing she knew, she was sobbing.

"Oh! Oh heavens, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Henry patted his pockets, apparently looking for a handkerchief, and finding none besides the bloody one he was already holding.

Caitlyn wiped her nose on her sleeve.

"I'm sorry, that was absolutely brutish of me," said Henry, his voice anguished with remorse.

"Oh, I wish I had a handkerchief for you," he sighed. "That's the problem, you see, that's just it. I want to help you. I'm sure my father treated you terribly, and you deserve to be well taken care of now. I..." he swallowed. "I'm sorry. I understand why you don't trust me. We'll find someone who will take you in. Someone trustworthy, someone you're happy with. Don't worry, everything will be alright. There there, it'll be alright."

He made no move to touch her, which Caitlyn was grateful for. He was lying back stiffly, holding his shoulder again, his left arm uselessly resting in his lap. Bits of reddened undershirt poked through the holes in his jacket where the dog had bit the arm. Despite her distress, Caitlyn couldn't help but feel it was a little comical, to be reassured by a person who looked so helpless himself.

She wiped her wet eyes with her hand. Gradually, her breathing eased. Henry slackened his shoulders, looking relieved. He slumped in his seat, only to grimace and then stiffen again. He smiled wanly.

"It's just... earlier, what I meant was..." he said tentatively, "I am the Earl of Coventry, you know. My home is Croome Court. It's a large estate. If you did want to stay with us, I've a staff who would see to your every need, and you wouldn't need to see me at all if you didn't want to."

Caitlyn didn't reply. She hadn't considered that John's being the former earl would make Henry the current one. It did change things, knowing there would be other people in the house. On the one hand, the offer sounded comfortable. On the other hand, it was still the Coventry family home. There would probably be reminders of John everywhere, not the least of which was Henry's emerald eyes.

"I mean, for God's sake," he muttered, "what's the point of having half a dozen spare bedrooms if even paupers are too frightened to stay in them?"

Caitlyn frowned. It didn't bode well that people were afraid of Croome. Henry's muttering and his swift apologies reminded her of John. Was he acting like John, or was she just imagining it? Once again, despair bubbled up into her throat and constricted her breathing. She willed the tears in her eyes to retreat, and concentrated on the scenery.

A warm breeze soothed her frayed nerves. The horses' tails flicked lazily as they walked. The grassland, which stretched for miles around, rippled gently in the wind. In the distance, the first few houses that marked the edge of town were visible. Ahead, another carriage was approaching, carrying two colorful figures.

Half-consciously, Caitlyn tugged back on the reins. Since last night, there had been no question in her mind that it was time to go. Yet even now, as the sun beamed and the birds sang of her freedom, the thought of making her own way in this strange new world terrified her. She tried not to stare at the two women in the approaching carriage. With their puffy sleeves and their hats bedecked in flowers and ribbons, they seemed to her like space aliens from another planet. They must have been thinking the same thing, for they stared at her, muttering gravely between themselves.

"The way they gawk," said Henry lightly, "you'd think they've never seen a buggy carrying a wounded aristocrat and a girl in men's clothes."

A smile twitched at the corner of Caitlyn's mouth.

The carriages passed each other, and then the two women were gone.

"Go ahead and gossip, you old biddies," he added softly, as their own buggy creaked along. "It's not as though the family reputation could be any more tarnished than it already is."

Caitlyn raised an eyebrow. She didn't know what to make of Henry. Even in the best of circumstances, she wasn't a very good judge of character. And this was hardly the best of circumstances. Her eyes wandered from his shoulder to the trail of dried blood on his temple, which originated somewhere in a mass of hair that was dark and chunky with blood. He'd taken quite a beating for her. She had to give him credit for that.

Henry looked back at her, apparently sensing her gaze. A friendly, reassuring smile flickered briefly across his face. Then his eyes traveled down to her wrist. Caitlyn looked down and saw that the sigil was exposed.

She pulled her arm in towards her ribs, trying to pull up the fabric of her sleeve. The sleeves of John's shirt were too short for her, however, and she managed to only half-cover it.

For a moment, Henry's brows knitted together. Then he looked back toward the road, face placid, as if he were already thinking about something else. He'd looked at her wrist as though she were merely wearing an unusual bracelet. Caitlyn was grateful that he did not ask any questions.

They rode on in silence, past the first house that marked the edge of town. She tensed as they passed one house, then another. The distance between houses diminished as they made their way into the town. More passersby gawked at them as the two women had. Caitlyn found that their attention did not bother her. In fact, perhaps she preferred it. She didn't belong there, so it felt appropriate that their eyes should say as much.

Henry wiped his face again with the bloody handkerchief. Then he stuffed it into a pocket and rested his hands in his lap, apparently deciding that he no longer needed to apply pressure to his shoulder.

"Should we find a doctor?" Caitlyn asked.

Henry waved away the suggestion.

"No, I'll be fine. He'll just give me a glass of brandy and tell me to rest."

Caitlyn had to keep herself from laughing at the concise summary of 19th century medicine.

"You're sure? You look terrible."

"Do I? Well, I assure you, I feel as jaunty as a sinner on a Sunday."

Suddenly, a child dashed into the road. One of the horses whinnied urgently as Caitlyn pulled hard on the reins. They were thrust forward in their seats, and Henry grunted in pain. The buggy jolted roughly to a stop.

The child looked at them quizzically. He was still about twenty yards away. A woman who might have been his mother hollered from behind a nearby house, and the boy dashed off toward her.

"Guess I overreacted," said Caitlyn, a little chagrined.

"Better than the opposite," said Henry wheezed. He pointed to a fork the road ahead, where a smaller road branched off diagonally from the main street.

"That's the way to Croome, if you'd like to come back with me. Otherwise, as I said, we'll find you some suitable lodging. Money is no object. You could stay at the inn for as long as you'd like. Or I can think of several acquaintances in town who would take you in."

Caitlyn grimaced. She recalled the Hearth and Home Inn with a sinking feeling in her gut. It was tainted by the memory of what had become the worst night of her life. The prospect of gambling on a stranger was even less attractive.

"Or," he added breezily, "we can just keep riding until we reach the end of the road, or the end of my patience, whichever comes first."

Caitlyn scowled at him, but he looked placid again.

"Why are you in such a good mood?" she asked pointedly.

He frowned as he seriously deliberated the question.

"I'm not sure," he said. He gazed distantly at the fork in the road. Caitlyn noticed that the bruise under his eye had grown and darkened since the start of their ride.

"It might be... that I look ridiculous, and you've already decided that you despise me, so really, there's no point trying to impress anyone. And that feels quite liberating."

He shrugged his good shoulder.

"Also, any day I can defy my father is a good day."

She mulled this over.

"What's your real reason for wanting to bring me home with you?"

"What is the work of an aristocrat if not to clean up his father's messes?"

"I'm being serious," Caitlyn insisted.

"So am I," Henry replied, his voice suddenly grave. "Perhaps other sons in other families get to choose their destiny, but for as long as I can remember, I have had one job, and that's to contain the damage my father can do. He is a stain on our family and an affliction on our town. I would have driven him out long ago if it were possible. But it isn't, so I try to be the man he should have been. I've dedicated my life to being everything my father isn't, and if you leave now, you'll think all magicians are curs. There, that's my reason. Of course I want you to recover from whatever ordeal you've been through, but the more selfish reason is that I want to prove to you that I'm not like him."

Then he looked preoccupied. He opened his mouth again, and hesitated. He looked down, and spoke quietly.

"I want to prove to *myself* that I'm not like him."

The townsfolk, the birds, and even the breeze remained silent.

Caitlyn bit her lip. It was a good answer, but was it true? She shuddered at the thought of ending up in a situation like the one she'd just gotten out of.

"And what if you're wrong?" she asked. "What if you're more like him than you know, or want to believe?"

Henry raised an eyebrow. Then he took a long, deep breath. Then he shrugged his right shoulder again. He opened his mouth helplessly, apparently at a loss for words. He gestured vaguely toward the road.

"You're the one holding the reins."

Caitlyn looked down at the reins, which suddenly felt heavy in her palm.

They sat quietly in the stationary buggy for several minutes. Behind them, a couple of children played in the street, quibbling over the rules of some game. Meanwhile, the dandelions that dotted the grass bobbed their heads yes, then no, in the shifting breeze.

On the one hand, Caitlyn didn't feel that Henry meant her any harm. On the other, appearances could be deceiving. She'd been a fool to trust John, most of all by believing he'd keep his promise to send her home last night. She couldn't afford to make a blunder like that again.

She reached deep inside herself for some sign, some intuition that could inform her what she ought to do next. Could she trust Henry, or not? She groped for an answer as if she were in a pitch-dark room, feeling around for a wall or a piece of furniture. She found nothing. The nothingness threatened to overwhelm her, and she felt an urgent need to make a decision before it completely obliterated her.

Caitlyn took the reins firmly in one hand, and brought down the whip in the other. This time, she called out to the horses herself.

Henry smiled gratefully as the buggy lurched forward, approached the fork, and then took the diverging road.

“By the by,” he commented as the horses navigated their familiar route, “I should have mentioned that my mother also lives at Croome Court. I think we would both do well to avoid her.”

“Why?” Caitlyn asked, alarmed.

“Oh, don’t worry, she’s completely harmless,” Henry quickly reassured her. “It’s just... well... let’s just say she worries too much as it is, so I try not to give her good reasons to.”

~

On her second evening at Croome Court, Caitlyn lingered by the window in Henry’s study. Through it, she made out the blurred profiles of two servants on the road below. Behind her, the grandfather clock ticked the dully passing seconds.

The study was a spacious room. On one side was a large desk with ornate clawed feet. On the other was a couch, loosely encircled by a couple of armchairs. Above this living area was a portrait of a young man with steely gray eyes. Next to Caitlyn stood the small table at which she and Marietta had eaten the previous night.

Her stomach growled.

It sounded hollow and angry.

She hadn’t wanted to eat dinner alone last night. It reminded her too much of the past month’s solitary dinners on her bed. On the other hand, she’d had no desire to dine with Henry. He’d offered to avoid her completely, and she’d taken him up on it. So, she’d eaten dinner with a servant girl named Marietta.

At Caitlyn’s encouragement, Marietta had done most of the talking. Marietta enjoyed needlepoint, cats, and singing. She aspired to marry one of the stable boys—Caitlyn forgot his name—but What’s-his-name would have to find better work if he was going to support a family. What’s-his-name was taking reading lessons from a local pastor. What’s-his-name was letting the pastor believe he wanted to go to seminary school, but really, he was just hoping that once he could read, he could work in a shop. Both Marietta and the boy felt guilty misleading him, but What’s-his-name had never actually stated his intentions clearly one way or the other, so really, it didn’t count as lying.

Caitlyn was grateful for the distraction, even if she did, occasionally, feel as though Marietta were very far away, shouting across a vast chasm that spanned the distance between the moon and the earth. However unsatisfactory the company, Caitlyn needed breaks from her solitude. Her silent hours were crowded with anxious thoughts, troubling memories, and a buzzing energy that insisted something was terribly wrong.

Of course, distraction was only temporary relief. What Caitlyn really needed was a purpose, or a plan. She hadn’t realized how much she’d relied on her dream of getting home. That dream had been her most precious possession, and now it was gone. Who was she now, without it? Was there even any point in going on? She felt overwhelmed at the thought of building a new life from scratch. Idle thoughts of suicide wandered into her mind often. She knew she would never act on them, but there was some relief in flirting with the idea.

For two days, she’d drifted aimlessly around her little corner of the mansion. Twice, she’d slipped out for a walk in the gardens, which were enormous and immaculate. However, she’d found herself unable to enjoy them. Books, baths, flowers, conversations, food—none of it felt as

good as it used to. Perhaps she'd lost the ability to feel joy. Occasionally, she even remembered her bedroom in John's house with an inexplicable nostalgia. Maybe because that bedroom was simply familiar. Or maybe because terror was in some ways preferable to meaninglessness.

Her heart skipped a beat as a knock sounded on the door behind her.

"Come in," she called.

She turned around, and then tensed. A cart loaded with food was being wheeled not by Marietta, but by an elderly man. He stood in the doorway of the study, dignified and upright. He looked as sharp as his crisp black uniform, and as thin as his silver hair.

"Pardon me... uh, Caitlyn,"—they all had to stumble over the word, as if to apologize for using it—"I know you were expecting Marietta," the old man said graciously. "Just say the word, and I'll fetch her. Only, Lord Henry thought you might find me an equally suitable companion."

Caitlyn remained tense, her back and shoulders arched like a cornered cat.

The butler looked over his shoulder, and then his voice became low.

"Lord Henry wishes to apologize for telling you that there was no one at Croome to whom you could speak of magic. You can speak to me of such things, if you wish."

Caitlyn eyed him suspiciously.

"Are you a magician?"

"Oh, heavens no," he said with a smile.

Caitlyn looked him up and down, and then gestured toward the table. With a small bow, he closed the door with one elbow, and then shuffled across the study. He wheeled the cart beside the table where the two young women had eaten the night before. Caitlyn and the butler both remained standing, with the food and table between them.

"If you're not a magician, then how do you know about magic?" she asked.

"I am Lord Henry's valet. I am something of a confidante to him, as I was to Lord John before him, as I was to Lord William before him. I assure you, furthermore, that whatever we discuss here will remain between us."

Caitlyn relaxed her shoulders. That was reassuring. Still, she needed to know where his allegiances lay.

"What do you think of Lord Henry?"

The valet—which Caitlyn supposed was something like a butler—seemed surprised by the question.

"Lord Henry is a good man. He works tirelessly to do right by his family and his city. He is young, but apart from that, I don't think Croome could be in more capable hands."

Caitlyn frowned, considering this.

"And Lord John?"

The old man sighed, and then furrowed his brow. He spoke deliberately, apparently choosing each word with care.

"Lord John was also a good man, but... of a different sort. He was like his predecessor, Lord William. Their goodness was hard to see."

He paused. He clasped his hands loosely in front of him, fingers fidgeting.

"Their goodness was hidden under a lot of pain. In a way, I suppose Lord Henry is the opposite. He hides his pain under a lot of goodness."

There was a bowl of strawberries on the cart, along with several hot dishes hidden under metal covers. Caitlyn moved toward the cart and plucked a strawberry. She bit into it and chewed thoughtfully.

"I knew Lord John better than most," the valet went on. "Perhaps better than anyone aside from Lady Coventry. He was a complicated man. He was always calling himself... oh, what was the word he used to use..."

He looked up at the ceiling, remembering.

"A *scoundrel*. I told him not to talk of himself that way. I warned him that if he kept insisting it was true, sooner or later, it would come true. And then one night, it did. Ever since then, as far as I can tell, it has remained true. And I have never been more unhappy to be right."

Caitlyn swallowed. She regarded the old servant warily. She was alarmed by his pronouncement of John's fundamental goodness, yet all in all, he did not seem too loyal to the former earl. And he would probably make for more interesting company than Marietta.

Decisively, she pulled out the chair nearest to her and sat down. She punched down the layers of her dress as they billowed up around her.

The valet promptly laid a folded napkin and a small arsenal of silverware before her. Then he began transferring the hot dishes to the table, uncovering them as he did so.

As with every meal she'd eaten at Croome, there was an extravagant quantity of food. There were fresh dinner rolls, roasted vegetables, what looked like fillets of beef, a creamy soup with a tiny pyramid of vegetables in the center, three savory pies a little larger than her fist, and on the lower level of the cart, a rich-looking cake with actual fresh-cut flowers on it. If she were feeling more herself, she would have been delighted. In her current state, though, food was nothing more than fuel, and the chef's efforts were wasted on an unappreciative audience.

Once all the food was on the table, the valet wheeled the cart to the wall, out of her line of sight. Then he gingerly placed a dinner roll on a small plate before her, and began to ladle the soup into a bowl. His thin, liver spotted hands trembled slightly. Caitlyn suddenly brushed him away.

"I can serve myself," she asserted.

The old man looked like he'd just been roused out of sleep. He blinked, and then put down the ladle and the bowl. Caitlyn quickly took them up. She'd already begun dunking her roll in her soup when she noticed that he was not sitting down, but watching her, with his hands behind his back.

"Aren't you going to eat?" she asked, gesturing with the dripping roll.

He bowed his head, and began preparing his own place setting.

Caitlyn suddenly realized she didn't know his name. She felt abashed for not asking sooner.

"What's your name?"

"Lawrence."

"Is that your first name or your last name?"

He smiled.

"Both, to everybody but my wife."

Still standing, he began ladling soup into his own bowl.

"It is my surname," he added warmly.

He sat, and Caitlyn felt her own tension slowly easing as they ate together.

"How is Henry? Er, Lord Henry?" she asked.

"He is in good spirits. Rather bruised, and hobbled by a broken rib, but it seems no permanent damage was done."

Caitlyn nodded, slurping her soup.

"Of course, he refuses to rest," Lawrence added, smiling fondly. "He was always that way. Even as a little child. No fall or scrape could slow him down. Now that he's grown up, he insists that the best kind of rest is a change of activity."

"What are his activities?" Caitlyn asked.

Lawrence looked at her quizzically, apparently unsure how to answer.

"I mean in general. What does he do?"

Still looking bemused, he said, "Well, he has many investments to attend to, properties and enterprises that he owns or supports. He has an active social life. And he is a member of Parliament, which keeps him very busy for about half the year."

Caitlyn frowned.

"A magician in Parliament?"

Lawrence shrugged.

"Stranger things have happened, wouldn't you say?"

Caitlyn didn't answer, and instead reached for the platter of filleted meats. She picked one up between her knife and fork and transported it, dangling, to her plate. She could feel Lawrence noticing her bad table manners, but she didn't care. She began incising the meat.

"Did you ever want to learn magic," she asked, "in all the time that you've known about it?"

"No," he answered, with a smile that crinkled the crow's feet around his eyes. "I am a simple man, content with my simple life. And after seeing what magic has done to this family, I have no desire to bring such tribulations upon myself."

"Most magic isn't like that," she objected. "Normal magic is safe. All it takes is a wand and a proper education."

Lawrence raised an eyebrow.

"You're a witch, then?"

Caitlyn drew her mouth into a hard line, but then she assented with a nod.

"Lord Henry would be most interested to know that."

"Why?" she snapped.

"Lord Henry has never known another magical person besides his father. For the past year and a half, he has been entirely dependent upon his father, whom he despises, for magical training. He's only heard of the wizarding world through his father. In all that time, he has dreamt of finding a witch or wizard who might introduce him to the magical community, and so free him from his father's influence."

Caitlyn chewed slowly, and then took a sip of water from her crystal goblet.

"Only a year and a half?" She recalled the impressive feats he'd performed in his fight with John.

"That's how long Lord Henry has had magic. Or at any rate, it was a year and a half ago that magical accidents began happening all around him, which he has since learned to control."

Caitlyn considered this.

"That's odd. Most witches and wizards discover their powers before the age of ten. And it takes many years to learn to do the things he can do."

Lawrence shrugged.

"I wouldn't know about that. But as you say, perhaps John Coventry's magic is different from 'normal magic.'"

"Yeah," Caitlyn said as she carefully punctured a meat pie. Already she was feeling full, but she didn't want to seem rude by not eating much.

"Witches and wizards go to magic school at a young age, and get a wand, and we learn to control our magic that way. Once you've been using a wand for a while, you lose the ability to do magic without one."

Her face suddenly flushed.

"At least, usually," she added, mumbling. "And it's illegal to even try any mad stuff, like time travel or immortality."

"Ah. That all sounds very sensible."

"I don't know who would even want immortality," Caitlyn said quietly.

"Not even John wanted it."

"What?"

She looked up, puzzled.

"He told me that his father did it to him, without his permission."

Caitlyn furrowed her brows. She'd assumed John had made himself immortal in his quest to push the boundaries of known magic. This version of the story, in which he was an unwitting victim of his father's magic, was bizarre, and for that reason, she was not unwilling to believe it.

"Considering you're the Coventrys' confidante, you're not very good at keeping their secrets."

"Lord Henry insisted I that should hide nothing from you."

"Hoping, in exchange, that I would hide nothing from him?"

"Not at all," said Lawrence, looking scandalized. "I assure you, there is no scheme here, except that Lord Henry wishes you to feel safe and welcome."

Caitlyn set down her silverware and leaned back in her chair. She was stuffed, and she had not even made it to the cake.

"Of course, I won't pretend I'm not curious," said Lawrence carefully, "what you were doing in the former earl's house."

Caitlyn crossed her arms and frowned. Her hard gaze bored into the table.

"Stalling," she said bitterly.

~

That night, Caitlyn found herself wandering the corridors, clutching her thin dressing gown tightly around herself. She'd been having nightmares. The nightmares weren't the worst part, though. The worst part was coming out of them.

As each nightmare reached its climax, for a fleeting moment, fantasy and reality would clash, and she'd dimly begin to comprehend that she was asleep, paralyzed, and powerless. She'd struggle against her useless body, fighting to lift her eyelids. Finally, she'd silently scream to herself,

WAKE UP! HE'S GOING TO KILL YOU! WAKE UP!

And then she would wake up, sweating and shaking. She'd take deep breaths, and clench and unclench the sheets crumpled in her fists. Then minutes or hours would tick by in which she'd stare into the darkness, afraid to leave her bed, but also afraid to go back to sleep.

She'd had such nights at John's house, but somehow, she hadn't thought much of it. Misery was a way of life there, hardly worth remarking on, not even to oneself. On this night, though, she determined that she could rebel against sleep, and so, at least, choose a different kind of misery.

As she drifted through the corridors in her lacy dressing gown, exhausted and sandy-eyed, she felt strangely empowered. It felt good to protest her situation. She was reminded of her nights with Rochelle, creeping around Hogwarts castle after dark. She was glad the old Caitlyn had not died yet, at least not entirely.

She crept through the entrance hall, the dining room, and the parlor. She explored all the rooms Henry had implicitly asked her to avoid, by suggesting she stay out of his mother's way. They were beautiful, even in the dark. The moonlight illuminated ornate tapestries and bounced off crystal chandeliers. Caitlyn tried not to be afraid of the figures lurking in the shadows, which always turned out to be simply unfamiliar furniture. She pretended she was walking through a museum after hours, one that she had all to herself.

Once she'd explored all the rooms that were unoccupied and seemed worth exploring, she ambled back towards her corner of the mansion. She wondered idly what time it was, and what she might do next to stave off sleep. She wished they'd had movies in 1863. Numbly, she supposed she'd never see a movie again. One more item for a list that included cars, phones, pop music, and toilet paper.

As she drifted down the hall that led to her bedroom, she noticed a dim light peeking out under one of the doors. It was the door to Henry's study. She stopped and stared down at the crack of light. Who was in the study at this hour, and why?

Leaning in, she heard a quiet voice. Henry's voice. She couldn't make out any of his words, but he was muttering, just as his father had done on so many occasions.

Time slowed like thick syrup. Caitlyn's bare feet dug into the carpet, and her windpipe seemed to contract. A familiar sense of helplessness crept up on her. She took a step back, just to reassure herself that she still could.

Henry was talking to himself. Should she flee? But then she'd only cower in her room, wondering what it meant. Maybe it was harmless. Or maybe he'd inherited his father's madness. Caitlyn had to know which.

She turned the handle, and the loud click seemed to echo down the corridor. Deciding it was no use trying to be surreptitious, she opened the door and stepped inside.

"Who's there?" Henry called.

To her surprise, his voice quavered meekly. He almost sounded frightened.

It took Caitlyn a moment to spot him. He was in the little living area at the far end of the study. He was sitting in one of the two armchairs which faced the couch and the wall. His back was to the door. Next to him was a small end table. On it was a wine bottle.

Henry shifted in his seat to turn and look at her. Even from across the room, she could see that his face was puffy and discolored.

"Oh, h'llo Caitlyn."

His words were deflated, and a little bit slurred.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. Warily, she approached him.

He leaned back in his chair, so that she lost sight of him for a moment.

"Forgive me for not standing up," he called groggily without looking at her. "Getting in and out of a chair is not as easy as it was three days ago. Nor, for that matter, is sleeping."

She walked toward him and stood beside the unoccupied armchair.

Henry wore a silk bathrobe mottled with dull reds and greens. His left arm was in a sling. His black eye had not abated since she'd last seen it.

"Even if you didn't have a broken rib, I wouldn't expect you to stand for me," she said.

Henry smiled weakly.

"Right. You're not one for conventions."

"Who were you talking to?"

His smile vanished. She noticed his lips were stained purple from the wine.

"My brother," he said dismally, gesturing with an empty crystal wine goblet toward the portrait above the couch. "What's left of him."

Startled, Caitlyn looked up at the portrait of the young man with dark hair and gray eyes. Her heart sank.

"Your brother..." she said softly. "He died?"

Henry nodded. He brought the wine glass to his lips, but then, realizing it was empty, put it down on the table beside him. Caitlyn noticed by the lamplight that the wine bottle was nearly empty, too.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Do you want to be alone?"

Henry stared vacantly ahead.

"Or... do you want to talk about him?"

He looked up at her, wide-eyed. Then his eyes and nose flushed red, and his lips contorted like he was about to cry.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I didn't mean to upset you—"

"No, no," he cut in. "You haven't. I..." He put a fist over his closed mouth, evidently trying to hold back a tide of emotion. His eyes were filling with glassy tears.

"No one's ever asked me that," he said quietly.

He pursed his lips, and a single tear silently rolled down his cheek. A choked cry escaped from him.

"It's been nearly two years since it happened, and no one's asked me that."

She watched him with pity, her fears rapidly ebbing. A moment later, Henry was weeping openly. She sat in the armchair beside her. For about a minute, neither of them spoke as more tears snaked down Henry's face. Several times he looked like he was about to speak, but then he only relapsed into watery sniffing. Caitlyn felt as if she had walked into a cathedral, or a cemetery. The oil lamps flickered like votive candles. The portrait of Henry's brother crowned the altar of their little chapel.

Gradually, Henry's crying abated. He cleared his throat.

"At first, we talked about it," he said, voice quavering again. "But I was afraid to talk about it, or even to think about it, any more than was necessary. I told myself I needed to be strong for other people. But now, nobody ever talks about him. It's like we all silently agreed to pretend he never existed."

He propped himself up in his chair, grimacing as he leaned into his good arm.

"The silence is maddening. A blasted conspiracy of silence... and I'm as much a part of it as anyone else."

He wiped his black eye gingerly with one finger.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I shouldn't be burdening you with this."

"You're not," Caitlyn insisted, shaking her head. "I was looking for a distraction, anyway."

Henry looked at her with concern.

"Bad dreams."

He nodded sympathetically.

"Tell me about him."

Henry looked apprehensive, and she gave him an encouraging nod. He took a deep, labored breath.

"Martin was my best friend. Perhaps my only true friend. But he was too good for this world. Too sweet and gentle. He loved with his whole heart. He did good things for people without seeking any reward for himself. He was always kind to people, and to animals, too."

Despite his tears, Henry smiled as he gazed up at the portrait.

"He had a razor-sharp wit, and a talent for art. He wrote exquisite poetry. Whenever I was angry with someone, he would draw a silly cartoon of them, and I'd laugh so hard that I'd forget to be angry."

He bit his lip, and new tears gathered in his eyes.

"He was so sensitive. He always knew what other people were feeling, sometimes before they did. But he would wilt like a flower before even the slightest criticism. He was so nervous around other people. You'd try to take him to a party, and he'd shake like a leaf the entire time. He'd stumble over his own words. He'd be nothing like the Martin I knew. I always wanted other people to see him for what he was: beautiful, brilliant, and gifted. But they only saw him as... strange."

He sniffed, audibly congested. He glanced at the little ring of liquid at the bottom of the wine bottle, and then looked away. He caressed his sling with his good hand.

"The truth is I was ashamed of him. I wanted him to make me look good, and to make the family look good. I made him feel like there was something wrong with him, just because he couldn't *perform* the way I could. Maybe that's why I'm part of the conspiracy of silence now. Maybe I'm still ashamed of him."

Henry looked as if he'd just bitten into something sour. The ticking of the grandfather clock filled the heavy silence. Caitlyn curled up in her chair, tucking her feet under her.

"How did he die?" she asked quietly.

Henry glanced at her with dull, bloodshot eyes.

"He died of a broken heart," he answered. "He was absolutely smitten with his first love. A girl named Beatrice. Like Dante's lover," he added with a sad smile.

"We all said Martin was too young for marriage, and that the girl was too poor, but he didn't care. He asked for her hand. Her family said yes. For about six weeks, they were the happiest lovebirds you've ever seen. Martin went about with a spring in his step, declaring himself the luckiest man on earth. Then, out of the blue, Beatrice died. She was climbing a tree—some romp or game, I suppose. She fell, badly. Martin found her. He was never the same. He was like an empty shell of a man, and with each passing month, he only grew worse."

Henry's voice grew cold.

"He died of a broken heart. But nobody remembers that. They only remember that he shot himself."

Caitlyn felt a chill course down her spine. She looked up at the serene young man in the portrait, and could not imagine him putting a gun to his head.

"I know what some of them were thinking," Henry said bitterly. "At least we still have Henry, the elder brother, the competent one. If you're going to lose one of them, better the spare than the heir."

He clenched his fist, and his knuckles turned white.

"What am I?" he spat. "A businessman. The world's got too many of those already. It needs more people like Martin. It should have been me. Sometimes I wish it had been."

Henry's angular shoulders became even more prominent as he sunk into his chair. He looked like an eagle nestling into its own feathers in an icy storm.

Caitlyn could not imagine how it would feel to lose one's brother in that way, and with the whole town watching. Suicide was still somewhat taboo in her own time, so she could only imagine the scandal it might cause in this one.

"And then, a few months after that," Henry said quietly, "I started to be able to do magic."

He directed his gaze at the wine goblet, as if speaking to it rather than to her.

"Ever since I found out my father was a magician, I wanted magic. Then when Martin died, I suddenly got more of it than I could manage. John said that when people develop magic as adults, it's often after some disaster. So I finally got my wish. At the price of my brother's death."

His voice was hollow. Caitlyn wanted to reassure him that he was being too hard on himself, but Henry spoke before she did.

"I don't even want magic anymore. I feel ashamed for ever wanting it. It makes me feel... dirty."

Caitlyn nodded.

"I know what you mean."

As soon as the words slipped out, she knew they were true. She, too, felt ashamed for ever wanting chaos magic. Maybe if she hadn't wanted it so badly, she might never have been raped. The thought made her insides writhe.

Henry looked at her uncertainly. Then he shook his head and cast his eyes downward.

"I'm sorry. I'm drunk. This is..."

"Helping me," she said quietly.

He looked up at her apprehensively.

"I don't know what it's like to lose a brother," she said, "or even to have one, but I do know what it's like to lose a piece of yourself. One that you'll never get back. And I know what it's like to miss it with every fiber of your being, and to wonder whether every day of the rest of your life will be spoiled by the pain of missing it. And I know what it's like to want to talk about it, but also not want to talk about it, because it'll be painful and no one will understand, and the last thing you want is to walk away feeling more broken than you do already."

Caitlyn swallowed. Her mouth felt dry.

"It's a burden no one should have to bear alone," she added.

"You bear yours alone," Henry replied.

"For now. Until I can find the right words."

He nodded.

"I understand," he said. "Thank you for listening."

For a minute, they sat in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

Caitlyn felt a quiet swell of gratitude for him. She had all but given up on finding someone she could trust in this century, but Henry was being more authentic and vulnerable than anyone she'd known in any century. She was beginning to feel like she'd made an actual friend.

Suddenly, the grandfather clock behind them chimed.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

She made a decision, and stood.

"I should go."

"I was just thinking the same thing." He gripped the arm rest, and grimaced as he began hoisting himself up painfully.

"And now," he said through gritted teeth, "I won't have to apologize for failing to stand up for you." He sighed with relief as he rose to his feet. "Even if it is a silly convention."

Caitlyn smiled.

"I don't think anyone could accuse you of failing to stand up for me."

He grinned.

In unison, they took a deep breath.

"I'll get the lamps," said Henry. "You go on. I hope you don't have any more troubling dreams."

Caitlyn nodded and took a few steps toward the door. Then she turned back to face him.

"You're wrong about one thing, Henry," she declared on her way out. He looked up expectantly.

"When you said maybe you don't talk about your brother because you're still ashamed of him. It's obvious that you're incredibly proud of him in your heart of hearts. And something tells me that if Martin were here, that's all he'd care about."

Henry's eyes shone in the lamplight.

"Thank you," he said softly.

Caitlyn departed, determined to get some good sleep that night, after all.

~

Caitlyn's plans for a peaceful, lazy morning were interrupted by a well-dressed woman bursting into her bedroom.

"So!" the woman cried triumphantly as she threw open the doors. "This is where he's been hiding you!"

Caitlyn was lying in bed, nibbling on some tea and biscuits Marietta had recently delivered. She hastily thrust her cup and saucer onto the breakfast cart as the woman stalked toward her bedside.

There could be no doubt that this was Henry's mother. If her condescending words and intrusive demeanor did not give her away, then her appearance did.

She was even more bird-like than Henry, with an imposing angular figure and a beakish aquiline nose. Her hair was pinned back in a tight bun, and even though it was streaked with gray, Caitlyn immediately recognized Martin's raven hair. The hairstyle revealed a prominent forehead, from which a blue vein presently bulged.

"So, you're the little strumpet he's been hiding from me. This will not do! Not at all!"

Caitlyn instinctively pulled up the covers toward her collarbone, even though her prudish Victorian nightgown left nothing exposed.

Henry suddenly appeared at the doorway.

"Mother!"

"Henry!" she hissed in a scandalized voice. "You shouldn't be here. She isn't decent."

Caitlyn couldn't help rolling her eyes. In her long-sleeved, high-collared nightgown, she was more fully clothed than the average 20th century woman.

"Leave her alone, mother."

Henry strode into the room. He took his mother's elbow gently, but she shook him off. She turned to Caitlyn.

"So!" she huffed again. "You're the reason my son looks like a common street ruffian!"

"Really, mother," Henry said exasperatedly, though his face turned a rosy pink, accentuating his black eye.

"This used to be a respectable house. And now we're serving breakfast in bed to... to... loose women!" She turned to Caitlyn, wagging an accusatory finger.

"You think you can march in here and charm my son out of his wits and his inheritance?"

Caitlyn balked.

"If that's your game here," Lady Coventry continued, undaunted, "then you've got another thing coming, missy. Maybe you could play that game with my dog of a husband, but you're not getting anywhere near my son. I'll not allow my son to be taken in by some low-bred, gutter-stalking, gold-seeking... whore!"

Caitlyn and Henry were both momentarily stunned.

"Well?" she demanded. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Mother, I'll carry you out of here if I have to," Henry said through gritted teeth, though his arm sling undermined the threat.

Caitlyn spoke in a quiet voice that was sharp as steel.

"I may be the whore who lived with John Coventry," she said dangerously, "but at least I'm not the fool who married him."

Lady Coventry gaped.

"You... you..." the vein in her forehead throbbed, and she was visibly shaking. "Do you know who I am?" she cried proudly.

Caitlyn smiled, remembering when Henry had asked her the exact same question in the carriage.

"Actually," she replied lightly, "I don't know what the wife of an earl is called. The earl-ess?"

Henry's mother flushed with anger.

"Countess," Henry replied, smiling. His mother whirled on him with a disapproving frown.

"Then what's the wife of a count called?"

"Also countess."

"That doesn't seem very fair."

"ENOUGH!" Lady Coventry cried. The two of them were smiling conspiratorially.

"I want her out of here, immediately! I don't mean today, I mean now!" She stomped toward the door.

"Come, Henry!" she commanded as if he were a dog.

Henry turned to Caitlyn and said in a low voice, "Don't listen to her. You're not going anywhere."

"Henry!" his mother cried from the doorway.

"It's alright," Caitlyn reassured him. "I'm used to adults telling me what to do. And I'm also used to ignoring them."

Henry gave Caitlyn an abashed nod, and began to follow his mother. When he was halfway across the room, Caitlyn called after him.

"Henry?"

He turned expectantly.

"You let her call you *Henry*?!" the countess shrieked.

"Yes, Caitlyn?" he answered playfully.

His mother let out a moan of dismay. Caitlyn thought the woman might faint.

"You don't have to hide from me anymore," Caitlyn said matter-of-factly. "I've decided that I don't despise you."

Henry grinned.

"And you don't have to hide from my mother anymore," he replied. "I wanted to protect you from her, but I can see you're quite capable of protecting yourself."

Caitlyn's smile faltered, as the reference to her own self-defense left a bitter taste in her mouth. Henry didn't seem to notice. He made a gracious little bow, and then turned to go.

Caitlyn swallowed, determined to announce what she'd been ruminating on all morning.

"One more thing, Henry. I'd like to take a trip London with you soon."

Henry's eyebrows shot upward. His mother let out a cold, derisive laugh.

Caitlyn didn't know for sure whether Diagon Alley had existed in 1863, but everything in the wizarding world was so old, she was willing to bet it had. She still wanted a wand, and she suspected that Henry might want one, too.

"How soon?" he asked.

"Henry!" his mother squawked.

"It's not an emergency, but it is important," Caitlyn replied.

He bowed again.

"I'll begin making arrangements."

"Oh no you won't!" the countess insisted, with another humorless laugh. "Come here, now!"

Henry winked at Caitlyn, and then left the room. His mother's eyes followed him unblinkingly as he passed through the doorway, making her look more hawkish than ever. She cast a glowering look at Caitlyn before slamming the door.

~

Caitlyn contemplated the rune she'd drawn in the sand. It was nothing like the original she'd seen in John's book. The original diagram had looked like a spiraling thorny vine, but hers looked more like a wet hairball. It was a sad failure, like everything else she'd ever attempted.

She was sitting at the edge of a pond in Croome's massive gardens, digging in the wet sand with a twig. Again and again, she looked into the water, muttering magic words about revelation and fate. However, the water's surface remained calm, aside from the occasional duck paddling by. It offered no visions of the future. It revealed only the sky, a few clouds, or, if Caitlyn leaned forward, a very sad girl.

The gritty dirt path behind her announced the approach of another person. More than one, from the sound of it. Tension coursed up her spine and raised the hairs on her neck. She turned to look.

She relaxed as she saw Henry and Lawrence stepping off the path and wading towards her through the grass. Lawrence wore a black suit and a bowler hat. Henry wore a gold vest, a blue suit, and a black top hat. Caitlyn waved half-heartedly.

Henry stopped before her, bowed, and lifted his hat a couple of inches off his head. Lawrence did the same. Caitlyn turned to face them, but did not bother to stand up from where she sat on the bank of the pond.

"Hello Caitlyn," Henry began, speaking rapidly. "I'm glad I've found you. I want to apologize for my mother's atrocious behavior this morning. You are our guest, and the way she treated you was unforgivable. There is simply no excuse for it."

"It's fine," Caitlyn said flatly.

"No, it isn't. You have every right to be furious with her, and me."

Caitlyn waved lazily at the air.

"I don't care. It's the sort of thing I've come to expect from—"

She nearly said, 'this century,' but stopped herself just in time.

"—the world," she concluded.

The truth was that he hadn't thought much about it since it happened. She felt a little disturbed, to realize how little the incident had disturbed her.

"I wish I could assure you it won't happen again," Henry said with a sigh, "but I won't make promises I can't keep."

"It's fine. Really. There's nothing to talk about."

She squinted up at him in the midday sun. Henry's black eye and arm sling were odd accessories to his dapper outfit. She recalled his mother saying he looked like a common street ruffian, and suppressed a smile.

Caitlyn fidgeted where she sat. She probably looked as ridiculous as Henry did, playing in the dirt in her enormous dress. Croome's version of casual daywear was more formal than anything she had ever worn. She wiped the sand from her hands onto her voluminous skirt. Luckily the skirt was brown, so the stains didn't show.

Lawrence and Henry suddenly looked at each other meaningfully. Henry jerked his head ever so slightly, and Lawrence gave an almost imperceptible nod. Then Lawrence put his hands behind his back, and began to stroll along the bank at a leisurely pace.

"Where's he going?" Caitlyn asked.

"Just giving us a bit of space," said Henry casually. Then, suddenly nervous, he hastily added, "Unless, that is, you don't want... I mean, if you'd rather..."

Caitlyn watched him with a raised eyebrow.

"If you'd rather have a proper chaperone, I wouldn't mind at all."

"A *chaperone*?" Caitlyn burst out in disbelief. "You mean he's *chaperoning* us?"

"Of course. I'm not usually so presumptuous as to speak to a young woman alone in close quarters. Our first two meetings were... well, I wasn't myself. And now I've gotten carried away. I'm sorry, I'll call him back."

"Don't!"

Caitlyn's mind whirled at the absurdity of a grown man like Henry needing a chaperone. Or was it purely for her sake? She tried to recall what she knew of interactions between men and women in the Victorian era. Had she read somewhere that women were supposed to be chaperoned in public? Surely that didn't apply to all women, all the time.

Henry watched her dubiously.

"I'm sorry if I've caused you distress."

"The only thing that's distressing is the fact anyone would think we need a chaperone. I'm not a child, and I don't like being treated like one."

Henry looked confused, but said nothing.

"My parents would have liked it here," Caitlyn scoffed. "They'd have loved the idea of my being chaperoned everywhere I went. Save them the trouble of watching my every move."

She looked around for the twig she'd been fiddling with earlier. She rotated back and forth until she found it. Then she began scratching off flakes of bark with her thumb.

Henry spoke tentatively.

"You're... uh, glad to be away from them, then?"

It was the first time he'd asked her about her origins since that disastrous moment in the buggy.

"I just don't like to be controlled," she said quietly.

Henry nodded, and asked no more about it.

Caitlyn started destroying the twig in her hands, stripping away the frayed ends like string cheese.

Henry stepped around her, towards the waterline of the pond. He cleared his throat and bounced on his toes as he looked out across the water. Caitlyn ignored him. She didn't mind his presence, but she wasn't going to go to any extra trouble to be courteous.

"Were you scrying?" Henry suddenly asked, amazed.

Caitlyn whipped around. She looked down at the hairball she'd drawn in the sand. Henry was looking at it, too. She felt her cheeks grow hot.

Henry was watching her with raised eyebrows, but she avoided his gaze. She looked toward the other side of the pond, where Lawrence had stopped walking. He was watching a mottled brown rabbit that was frozen like a statue, except that its ears rotated like satellite dishes.

Caitlyn bit her lip. If she couldn't talk to Henry and Lawrence, then who could she talk to? She had to admit, a part of her did want to talk.

"Trying to. Unsuccessfully," she mumbled. "I was always a failure when it came to normal magic. I don't know why I thought chaos magic would be any different."

Henry sharply inhaled. Caitlyn recalled what Lawrence had said, about how Henry had been dreaming of meeting a witch or wizard.

"What were you trying to scry?" he asked, his voice vibrating with contained excitement.

Caitlyn stared at the lily pads drifting lazily across the pond's smooth surface. She'd never heard anyone talk of scrying. She only recognized the words from John's books. At Hogwarts, they'd called it divination.

She shrugged.

"My future. I want to know what I'm supposed to do next. I need some kind of plan, or purpose."

"A plan and a purpose are rather different things," Henry said quietly. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that he, too, was gazing out over the water.

"Yes, well, it doesn't matter. I couldn't get it to work. As usual. I'm a failure at chaos magic. I'm a failure at everything I've ever tried."

Caitlyn picked up a pebble. It was cool and wet between her fingers. She tossed it into the air, and it dropped into the pond with a satisfying plink.

"In my experience, chaos magic isn't really a matter of skill," Henry said pensively. "It's half wisdom, and half desperation."

"Well, then, I guess I'm not wise enough, because I don't think I could be any more desperate," Caitlyn said bitterly.

Henry spoke slowly.

"Would you... like to talk about it?"

Caitlyn knitted her eyebrows.

"About what? Magic?"

Henry gave an encouraging half-shrug with his good shoulder.

Caitlyn looked away and refused to look at him, instead watching the algae on the surface of the pond with uncanny intensity.

Henry sighed.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to intrude. I'd simply hate for you to believe that you're not capable. I'm sure you are."

"Are you going to tell me a lot of nonsense now about trusting magic, even to the point of madness?"

Henry cocked his head inquisitively.

"Why would I do that?"

"That's what your father said. He said to trust magic, and trust means knowing a thing is right and true, even if it is also overwhelming, terrifying, and senseless."

Henry tilted his hat and scratched his head.

"Well, he may have said that, but I'm willing to wager that the first thing he said was, 'There are no rules.'"

Caitlyn looked up at him warily. Lawrence slowly padded past, a few feet from them, as he began another circuit around the pond.

"Fine," she said flatly, once Lawrence was out of earshot. "If you're such an expert, then you show me how to do it."

Henry rolled his eyes.

"I can't do that," he said with a note of impatience. "No one can show you how to do it."

"Then chaos magic is a bad system!" she cried. "It's not a system at all! You can't create a methodology out of 'Do whatever you want, whenever you want!'"

"Have you ever tried doing whatever you want?"

"Of course!"

"Are you sure about that?"

Caitlyn frowned and lifted her chin haughtily, but Henry did not seem to notice her indignation.

"You can't do what you want if you don't *know* what you want. And I think you, Caitlyn Holbrook, don't know what you want."

Caitlyn shot up off the ground. Sand cascaded out of the folds of her skirt as she stood.

"You don't even know me!"

"I know that you hesitated for a long time in the buggy before you came to Croome. And you're still hesitating now. When you spoke so eloquently in the study last night, that was a kind

of magic, wasn't it? You have such wisdom inside of you. The problem is not that you need to trust magic. It's that you need to trust *yourself*, Caitlyn. If anything, you trust magic too much. And, I know I shouldn't say it, but... I suspect that you trusted my father too much."

Without a moment's hesitation, Caitlyn slapped him. It landed squarely on his left cheek, with a resounding smack. Henry did not react but remained still, head turned to one side. Lawrence began hastening toward them.

"You... you..." she sputtered through gritted teeth.

She shoved him. Henry stumbled backward, free arm waving.

Tears filled her eyes. Henry's words burned and twisted in her chest like a hot knife. Maybe he was right. She had trusted John too much. All of this was her own fault, even the rape. Especially the rape.

She pummeled Henry's chest with her fists, punctuating her words with frantic, flopping punches.

"You... don't... know... anything... about... me...!"

Henry absorbed her soft punches like a wall, stoic and unyielding.

Lawrence was suddenly beside her, reaching for her forearm, but she batted him away like a pesky fly. Henry reached for her frantic arms, his face and voice calm.

"Caitlyn, please."

Ignoring his own sling, Henry caught Caitlyn by the wrists. He pulled her in close, not aggressively, but with tender steadiness.

"Listen to me, Caitlyn. Calm down. Everything is alright."

Caitlyn stopped struggling. She avoided Henry's gaze, and instead looked down at the blurry ground through her tears.

"Listen," he repeated. "You are not a failure. I know that you feel lost right now, but you won't always feel this way. You are stronger and wiser than you know, Caitlyn, and the day you see that, you will find your purpose and pursue it without hesitation. That day will come. I have faith in you. Take heart in that, until you are ready to have faith in yourself."

Caitlyn shook him off, even though a part of her wanted him to pull her in closer. She took several steps away and turned toward the water, ignoring Henry for a moment. She tried to focus on the nooks and crannies of the algae, commanding the tears in her eyes to retreat.

Henry wasn't accusing her of being responsible for the rape, of course. He didn't even know about it. But he was right that she had trusted John too much. She had hesitated in that accursed house for too long.

She resented Henry for being right, yet she couldn't stay upset with him. He'd called her wise—something no one had ever done. He had faith in her. She had not realized how deeply she'd longed to hear somebody say those words, 'I have faith in you.' Perhaps she longed for it because, as Henry said, she didn't have faith in herself.

She looked down at the squiggly rune by her feet. She kicked it, and the damp sand yielded and clumped beneath the toe of her shoe. She kicked several more times, until the rune was completely gone.

She'd had a bad feeling about John since the moment she'd knocked on his door, and she'd overruled that feeling again and again and again. Instead of trusting her own intuition, she'd ignored it. She silently vowed to herself that she would never again ignore that feeling. Never again would she complain that she had no plan. Henry said that she had wisdom. And that meant she didn't need a plan.

She wiped the tears from her eyes with her dirty sleeve. In her peripheral vision, she saw Henry approach the water's edge, about ten feet away. Caitlyn stared fixedly ahead.

Suddenly, the reflection on the water's surface began to change. Instead of a blue sky, clouds, and treetops, the water showed Caitlyn's face. It wasn't a reflection, but an image, like out of a movie. It was the image of another Caitlyn, frightened, her face illuminated by firelight. John's face appeared next to hers. He was leaning in close, jaw clenched, shaking her by the wrist. She was recoiling in fear.

It was the night they met, in the forest. Caitlyn grew cold as she watched the familiar scene. It was dark and chaotic, lit only by the ball of flame John had conjured. There was no sound, but she didn't need it. She could remember what they'd said.

I've never seen it before!

DON'T LIE TO ME!

Stop! You're hurting me! Petrificus—Aah!

The image of Caitlyn drew her wand. When it burst into flames, she tossed it aside. She tried to move, but John held her wrist so tightly that his nails cut into her skin.

Tell me the truth. What do you know about this sigil?

I don't know anything! I've never seen it before! I don't even know what a sigil is!

Then John released her.

Watching intently, Caitlyn anticipated what came next. However, the pond did not show how she'd dived for her charred wand. Instead, it remained focused on John, whose face was inscrutable. First he looked confused, then his eyes widened, as if suddenly realizing something. Then his face grew fearful.

I'm sorry. My Irish temper. It still gets the better of me at times.

In the image, he was meekly wringing his hands. Or was he? Caitlyn leaned towards the water, watching intently.

John wasn't wringing his hands. *He was cradling his wrist.*

Caitlyn's heart began to pound as she watched the water, transfixed. The whole scene replayed itself. Again, John grabbed her, then tossed her aside. Then his face changed, and he cradled his wrist. While she watched, Caitlyn stroked the sigil on her own wrist.

Henry and Lawrence approached. She ignored them. Together, the three of them watched the scene play out on the water's surface. Again, it repeated itself. Then once more. Finally, the movie faded, and the water resumed reflecting the blue sky above Croome Court.

"We won't let that happen," said Henry quietly.

"It already happened," Caitlyn snapped. "That was the past, not the future."

"My God," he said quietly. "I'm so sorry that he did that to you."

"That's the least of what he did to me."

Henry looked at her with concern. "I don't understand any of this."

"Of course you don't. But I do. I understand everything now. And..." Caitlyn hesitated for the space of a breath. "I think I have a plan."

She swallowed. She could feel righteous energy surging through her. She suddenly couldn't bear the thought of drifting about the mansion like a ghost. She had to act now, or else she might go mad.

"Tell me how I can help," Henry offered.

"Your money would be a good start," said Caitlyn flatly.

"Fine. Listen, Caitlyn, I'm sorry—"

"Don't apologize," Caitlyn snapped. She turned to look at him.

Henry's face was lined with worry. His eyes were not as bloodshot as they had been at 4 o'clock that morning, but they were dull, with heavy shadows underneath. Up close, she could see several small scratches around his lips and nose from his fight with John.

Caitlyn sighed, and her voice softened.

"You have nothing to apologize for."

Henry nodded.

Caitlyn looked down at his embroidered waistcoat, which shone in the sun. The birds twittered around them. The pleasant day belied the turmoil in her gut.

"I know it isn't my place to ask, but I want to understand," Henry prodded gently.

Caitlyn took another deep breath. She lifted her chin and looked him in the eyes.

"You're right, it isn't your place," she declared proudly. "But the short version is that your father's killing and raping women for his own pleasure, and I'm a witch from a hundred years in the future. But I'd really rather not talk about it until we're on the road to London."

With that, she strode off through the grass, back toward the mansion. She could hear Lawrence's voice behind her.

"I'll hasten the arrangements for your trip, my Lord. You could depart today, if you'd like."

"Not just today, Lawrence," said Henry gravely. "Within the hour."

~

"Are you sure about this?"

"For the millionth time, Henry, yes."

"I don't like this plan. It's dangerous. Besides, haven't you suffered enough?"

"A little more pain won't make much difference."

Caitlyn stepped behind the desk in Henry's study. Her green witch's robe brought out the pink in her cheeks and the red in her hair, which was tied back in a low ponytail. A few unruly curls escaped it, framing her face. Her spine was straight as she took her seat behind the desk. Beside her, Wilbur Croft drew his wand. Croft was Hogwarts' Professor of Defense against the Dark Arts, and the person who had accused Caitlyn of dark magic on her first night in 1863.

Henry stood on the other side of the desk, beside the healer, Louisa Higgs. He put a hand on the elderly woman's shoulder.

"I'm counting on you," he said soberly.

"Lord Coventry," said Higgs, with the tone of governess losing patience with her charge, "I have been a healer for forty-seven years, and a master healer for thirty of those. I assure you, Caitlyn will leave this room without so much as a papercut."

Caitlyn pushed up the sleeve of her robe, revealing the sigil on her wrist.

"Do it."

Croft put his wand to her forearm.

"I can't watch," said Henry, turning away.

~

Theodora Coventry was nonplussed to find her son, fully dressed, pacing in the foyer of the mansion.

"Henry, dear, what on earth are you doing? It's past midnight."

"Mother!" he exclaimed, blanching. "Go to bed, please, this doesn't concern you."

Theodora frowned. She lifted the skirt of her nightdress and began padding softly down the stairs. Her son was looking better every day, with his black eye healed and the arm sling abandoned. Nevertheless, as his wounds healed, he seemed to grow more inwardly troubled, as if he had swallowed his infirmity and it was now painning him from within.

"How can I be expected to sleep when my son is up to something?"

"I'm not. It's nothing."

"I'm not naïve, Henry. You send away nearly all the servants for the night, and then let some queer people into our house, and then you say there's nothing going on? Are they still here, by the way?"

Henry nodded.

"Why aren't you with them?"

He waved his hand.

"They can watch themselves."

She reached the bottom of the stairs and approached him. His face was pale and haggard. His eyes darted quickly toward the door. Theodora couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her son so agitated. He was ordinarily so composed, even under pressure.

Whatever was going on, it surely had to do with that girl. Theodora cursed the day Henry had brought her home. She was like a kitten he'd found in the gutter who did nothing but scratch and bite and spread fleas.

Henry took her hand and tugged her back in the direction of the stairs.

"Come along, mother. I've allowed you to stay tonight, at your insistence and against my better judgment, but you must at least give me some privacy. I have everything under control. I just need to do this one thing and then everything will be..." he paused, knitting his eyebrows.

"Fine," he finished tersely.

Theodora remained planted where she stood, so that Henry pulled ineffectually on her outstretched arm. His eyes silently pleaded with her.

"Does this have anything to do with your father?" she asked sharply.

Henry released her hand and let out a frustrated sigh.

"I knew it," Theodora snapped. "First you brought that horrid girl upon us, and now she's brought your father upon us."

"Don't speak of Caitlyn that way."

"Caitlyn," she pronounced it like a curse. "She is horrid! She has no sense of decency, and who knows what sort of filth and roguery she was up to with your father. How many times have I told you that you mustn't let your father into your life, not for a minute, or he'll take everything and never leave. He's like a—"

She was going to say 'disease', but stopped herself. Henry's vivid green eyes were boring into her. She could tell Henry what to do, but she could not command those eyes. John's eyes. The eyes that she'd fallen in love with, and perhaps because of Henry, had never entirely ceased to love.

There was a knock at the door. Henry stiffened. With one last scowl at Theodora, he darted toward the heavy front door and thrust it open a few inches.

"Just a moment!" he hissed. Then he abruptly slammed it shut. He turned around, keeping his hands behind him, resting on the doorknob.

"Henry, please..." Theodora begged, shaking her head. "Tell me..."

He pressed his lips into a thin line.

"No. You wouldn't understand."

For a moment they glared at each other, still and silent. Henry kept his back to the front doors as if holding off a storm that would batter them down.

"Just a moment!"

They both jumped at the shrill voice echoing off the foyer's polished marble.

Theodora whipped around, searching left and right for the speaker. There was no one in the foyer besides herself and Henry. Her eyes swept the floor, roamed up the staircase, and then finally settled on the chandelier. Amid the golden branches, there perched a green parrot.

"*Crawwwwwk!* Just a moment!"

In her shock, Theodora let out a short scream.

"Oh for God's sake," muttered Henry.

It took Theodora only a moment to arrive at the most likely explanation.

"He's here?!" she exclaimed. "Your father is here?!"

"Just a moment!"

"Just a moment!"

She gaped as she looked back up to see two green parrots nestled in the chandelier.

"Henry, don't you dare let him into this house," she warned.

"In case you've forgotten, mother, Croome is my house now."

"Don't be saucy with me!" she hissed. "I've lived here far longer than you have, and if I were a man, Croome would be mine!"

Henry pouted like a reprimanded child.

"Just a moment!"

"Just a moment!"

"Just a moment!"

To her horror, Theodora now counted three parrots.

"I need you to trust me," Henry said desperately. "Please trust that I know what I'm doing."

Trust him? Theodora reflected bitterly that her father, Lord William Coventry, must have said the same thing when he shocked the nation by adopting an unknown Irish artist as his legal son and heir. Little did the public know that his nationality was the least of the young artist's secrets.

"Just a moment!"

"Just a moment!"

"Just a moment!"

"Just a moment!"

Henry turned and flung open the front doors.

"Blast you! Will you not give me a moment's peace!"

"Patience was never one of my virtues," said a familiar voice.

The voice was smooth and calm, yet it hit Theodora like a slap in the face. She had not heard that voice in twenty years. She had avoided John that completely. Even at Martin's funeral she had grudgingly allowed him to attend, on the condition that he did not speak. The last time she'd heard that voice, it had been cackling and rambling nonsense, while smoke had filled her lungs and her friends had tried in vain to unlock the doors of a burning bedroom.

"Theodora," the voice crooned with an audible grin. "This is a pleasant surprise."

John Coventry had stepped into the foyer, face obscured by a black cloth mask that covered his head and revealed only his eyes. He wore leather gloves and a black cloak with the hood up. He spread his arms wide, as if awaiting Theodora's embrace. He was like a ghost, a grotesque shadow of the man she had married.

Theodora's heart pounded as she attempted to steel herself. God only knew what sort of calamity John might bring down on them. Of only one thing was she certain. She would protect Henry to her last breath.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded icily.

"I'm doing quite well, thank you for asking."

"Come on," Henry barked. He was already waiting at the bottom of the stairs. He was motioning for his father to follow, but John lingered unhurriedly. His mask turned to Theodora.

"I've come for the girl."

She huffed.

"Of course. Henry, hand her over, and get him out of here."

"Mother, this doesn't concern you. Father, follow me."

"Why so hasty, Henry?" said John mildly. "Isn't this nice? Here we are, together, almost like a real family again."

"We were never a real family," Henry spat.

"Ooh, alright, very well." John's green eyes flashed through the dark void where his face ought to have been. "Give me the girl, and I'll be on my merry way."

"Henry, give him what he wants!"

"Stay out of this," said Henry darkly.

"Henry! I am your mother! You would risk our lives to protect some hussy you've known for two weeks?"

John chuckled softly.

"Mother, I told you, I know what I'm doing."

"You don't!" she cried, her temper flaring. "You don't know him as I do!"

"I wonder, though," John murmured, "whether you know Henry as I do."

Theodora and Henry both rounded on John with daggers in their eyes. Even with the mask, Theodora could see his eyes shining with delight.

"Give me the girl, Henry, or in my restlessness I may begin to feel... loquacious."

Theodora glanced back at Henry. The color seemed to be draining out of his face. His lips were parted in an appalled expression. Theodora's mind raced as she tried to understand what John was referring to. What could have disturbed Henry so?

"You wouldn't," said Henry quietly.

"Give me the girl!"

John's voice suddenly lost its oily charm and took on a cruel, crooked bent.

Henry's chest swelled, and his eyes blazed. He held his ground firmly. None of them moved. The foyer was so quiet one could hear a pin drop.

Then John's hand darted upward, and a green light flashed.

Theodora recoiled and screamed again.

When she looked back at Henry, she could hardly believe her eyes.

The banister of the staircase had been replaced by a large black snake that was rearing up in front of Henry, fangs bared. Instinctively, Theodora lunged forward to protect him.

Before she could take three steps, however, Henry waved his hand and the snake suddenly shot toward Theodora. In the blink of an eye, it was in front of her, then past her, and coiling around John. Henry waved again, and in an instant John was upside down, hanging beside the chandelier from a large, black rope that wrapped around his ankles. The snake's head had been transformed into a harmless bundle of fraying fibers.

"Well done, my boy!" John cried cheerfully. "What you lack in strength, you regain in speed!"

Theodora felt unsteady on her feet, and it was all she could do to keep from toppling over.

"Henry!" she gasped. "You... you...!"

Her head swam as the truth crashed down on her like a rotten roof. She had long since dismissed the question of whether her sons would inherit their father's supernatural abnormality. She'd thought that if they had, she would have known it by now. But here was proof that Henry had, and she'd known nothing. Shame and anguish tugged on her heart as she looked at her son and saw a stranger, one who apparently did not trust her enough, or respect her enough, to tell her the truth.

"Mother, I'll explain later. Right now I need you to trust me and stay out of my way!"

"You did this!" Theodora shrieked, pointing an accusing finger at John. "You contaminated him with your devilry!"

Still hanging upside-down, John cackled with glee as he had on that terrible night twenty years ago. Chills ran down Theodora's spine, and tears gathered in her eyes. Henry, meanwhile, was bounding up the stairs. When he reached the top, he waved again, and whatever invisible force held John's rope suddenly jerked it backward.

"Owwww," he cried, as he landed on the carpeted upper landing with a thud. The invisible force began to drag him along the floor behind Henry.

"Don't worry, love of my life!" John called out to Theodora. "I promise I won't set the house on fire again!"

Then they both disappeared down the hall. Theodora glanced toward the staircase. The banister was back where it had always been. She eyed it warily, but only hesitated for a moment. Marshalling her courage, she lifted her skirts and proceeded to follow the two magicians.

~

Caitlyn listened attentively to the muffled sounds downstairs. Bizarrely, she heard the squawking of parrots, and two shrieks from Lady Coventry. Then she heard John cackling madly. The sound drove into her heart with an icy pang. She looked around to the wizards and witches for reassurance. Their eyes met hers with steely calm. Each one of these people knew what they were getting into, and she was deeply grateful for them. She tried to absorb their courage.

She had to remember to breathe as she heard feet climbing up the staircase. Nobody in the room spoke or moved. They were as deadly silent as a platoon of soldiers. All held their wands at the ready, except Caitlyn. In her right hand, she held not a wand, but a dagger.

Slowly, the door to the study opened. Henry entered first, looking drawn and haggard. Then Caitlyn glimpsed John behind him. John stopped at the threshold of the study, eyes wide as they peeked out from his mask.

Twenty-five wizards were gathered in the study, all of them directing their wands at John.

Henry roughly grabbed the front of John's shirt and pulled him inside. Then he slammed the study door shut behind them. That seemed to rouse John from his shock. He swept his gaze across the room. Then, slowly, he raised one hand to his neck and pulled off his mask.

His face was as cherubic as it had ever been. His lips were curled in a venomous smile, and his eyes glittered as they bored into Caitlyn.

"Miss Holbrook," he said, his voice dripping with spite.

Caitlyn met his gaze with stony silence.

Still smiling, John began removing his gloves. He was making an effort to appear unperturbed, but his eyes darted around the room, apparently counting his enemies and trying to calculate his chances. Caitlyn glowed with satisfaction as she sensed his fear.

"I received your message," he said with feigned mildness. He pulled up his left sleeve to the elbow, and ran a finger over his bandaged forearm.

"Concise and to the point, but I daresay your delivery could use some softening."

Caitlyn had not bothered to bandage hers. Blood dripped freely down her arm and collected in her palm. Her sleeve was rolled up, too. Two words had been carved into her forearm:

LET'S TALK - CH

John nonchalantly pocketed his gloves. Caitlyn's whole body shook with rage as she yearned to wipe the smile off of his boyish face.

With lightning speed, she brought the dagger to her temple and slashed it across her own face. It stung like fire, searing her skin and heating her whole body. Inwardly, she fought to hold herself together.

"Agh!" John cried out, as he doubled over, cradling his face in his hands.

When he stood up straight again, he was the one trembling this time. His face was marred by a hideous gash. He dropped his pretense of civility. The two of them regarded each other with undisguised hatred, blood pouring from their identical wounds. Caitlyn tasted blood on her lips.

The healer came between them and stood before Caitlyn. She brought her wand to Caitlyn's face, and traced the wound, muttering a few words. Cool relief replaced the burning sting. The healer also took her arm, and healed that wound as well. She handed Caitlyn a handkerchief. Caitlyn took it and dismissed the woman with a wave, then wiped the blood from her now intact arm and face.

John wiped his own face with his sleeve. His wounds had healed, too.

Slowly, he clapped several times, the sound landing dully in the crowded room.

"Well, well, well. Congratulations, Miss Holbrook," he said with asperity. "You've finally managed to solve the riddle of that sigil on your wrist. And it only took you, let's see, six weeks? I was sure you'd solved it on the day I stopped you cutting yourself with that bit of broken mirror, but... well, I suppose you were never the cleverest in your cohort, were you?"

Caitlyn's eyes narrowed. She pointed the dagger directly at him, as if it were a wand. John chuckled softly.

Then she took the dagger and rested it lightly on top of her jugular vein.

"No!"

John and Henry both cried out in unison.

"Caitlyn!" Henry exclaimed.

"Be quiet, Henry, or I'll command you to leave!"

Caitlyn did not take her eyes off of John. He was pale and wide-eyed, as his swaggering confidence rapidly drained out of him.

"What would happen to you, if I died?" she asked calmly.

John remained rigid where he stood.

"You don't know, do you?" She asked in the same untroubled voice, keeping the knife on her throat. "Come on, guess. What do you think would happen?"

John didn't answer. Caitlyn pressed the knife into her neck until she felt it prick her skin. The tip of the knife bobbed up and down to the rhythm of her blood in her veins below. A drop of blood appeared on John's neck.

"Caitlyn, please," she heard Henry whisper.

"You think I wouldn't do it?!" she cried to the room, her voice cracking.

"You've given me every reason to!" she screamed at John. The words tore at her throat, and she waved the knife in a wild arc in front of her.

Just then, all heads turned as the door to the study opened, and Lady Coventry peeked into the room. She shrank away from their stares, even as she opened the door wider.

"Look at me," Caitlyn snarled, directing her words at John. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the countess blend silently into the crowd. Caitlyn ignored her.

"You will do as I say."

John's eyes narrowed. He was holding his palms open at his sides, as if gathering some magical energy. Nevertheless, he did not act.

They sized each other up with steely eyes. Caitlyn didn't know whether it was possible for the wizards to contain John if he tried to fight. However, it was clear that he had no escape from the enchantment that bound them through her sigil. Wherever she was, and perhaps *whenever*

she was, Caitlyn would always have the power to wound him. She could even destroy him. All that was required was the willingness to destroy herself, a possibility that did not frighten her as much as it should have.

She approached him. Every step filled her with revulsion and fear, as if she were approaching a rabid, frothing animal. Yet she took the next step anyway. When she was within arm's reach of John, she stopped.

"Kneel," she commanded.

One of his wild green eyes twitched as he struggled to contain his fury.

"Kneel, Zkanuthel," she said quietly.

John flinched.

"How do you know that name?" he snapped, eyeing her with paranoid intensity.

Her lips hardened into a thin line.

He grimaced, his whole face coloring and contorting with anger. Slowly, he knelt before her. She stooped over him as she spoke with deadly menace.

"This is the difference between you and me. I'm not afraid of a little pain," she hissed.

She dug the knife into her left palm.

John screamed. He clutched his own palm, and Caitlyn saw streaks of blood creeping out from between his fingers. She hardly noticed the burning pain that shot up her arm, nor the cold sweat that broke out over her whole body.

"Now then," she said steadily. "You will send me back to March 6th, 1990. Then you will fly far from here, far from any hint of civilization, and you will dedicate your worthless life to repentance. And if you don't, the entire wizarding community will hunt you down and break you like the beast you are. They will not show you mercy a second time. Do you understand me? Do you understand how lucky you are, that this is all I ask?"

John looked straight ahead, as if Caitlyn were not there.

"I said, do you understand me."

John glared up at her with fire in his eyes. His voice was ice cold.

"I will meet you again in one hundred and twenty-seven years, Caitlyn Holbrook. And when I do, I will eat your heart."

She spat on his face.

He recoiled, and wiped the saliva from his cheek.

"I don't fear you, Zkanuthel."

"Agh!"

John suddenly crumpled, hunching his back, and placed his hands over his ears. Caitlyn marveled at the reaction.

"Zkanuthel, Zkanuthel, Zkanuthel!" she shrieked, delighting as John writhed on the floor beneath the name. She began to laugh.

"That's enough!"

Henry's voice boomed out from the crowd. He took Caitlyn by the shoulders and pulled her away from John.

"You've made your point," he said brusquely. Caitlyn glared at him, but she allowed him to lead her back to the edge of the circle of witches and wizards.

John raised himself onto all fours, and then looked up at Henry.

"You," he spat.

He staggered to his feet, keeping his eyes locked on his son.

"Traitor!" he bellowed. "Martin would never do this to me. Martin would never betray me." John pointed at Henry with his bloody left hand.

"You were always Theodora's son. Martin was mine!"

He trembled as he spoke, and his face was contorted, not with anger, but with pain.

"Why couldn't God have taken you instead?! Martin was mine!" he repeated. "Martin talked like me, and thought like me. He made art like I do." John's breathing was ragged. "Even his magic was more like mine! He understood the meaning of magic! Not like you! You would ally yourself with these defilers of it!"

"What?" Henry asked with disbelief. "Martin had magic?"

"Did Martin have magic," John chuckled dryly. "Did Martin have magic?! Do birds fly?!" John's chest expanded proudly.

"He was like me, a prodigy. He was a gifted magician."

"I don't believe you," Henry snapped. "If Martin had magic, why would he tell you and not me?"

John rolled his eyes.

"Oh, really, Henry. Do you have to ask?"

Henry furrowed his brows in confusion. Caitlyn looked back and forth between the two of them, her own predicament receding into the back of her mind. She started as the healer lightly took her hand, and put a wand to Caitlyn's wounded palm.

"Martin adored you," John said grudgingly. "You were more of a father to him than I ever was. He wanted to make you proud. He seemed to think that if you knew about his magic, you would be ashamed of him."

Henry swayed where he stood, like a thin reed in a breeze. His nose reddened, while his eyes became glassy with tears. He swallowed thickly.

John looked around the room, and suddenly locked eyes with Theodora Coventry. The two regarded each other for a long, silent moment. Caitlyn wasn't sure whether the countess had known about John's immortality and implacable youth. If Theodora was surprised to see his boyish face, she didn't show it.

The Lord and Lady Coventry watched each other as if nothing else in the world existed. To Caitlyn's surprise, each of them gradually seemed to soften under the other's gaze. John's shoulders sagged, and his knees buckled. Theodora was no longer the screeching hawk Caitlyn remembered. Her face was lined with a pain that she carried with grace and dignity.

"What else did Martin ask you to hide from me?" Henry suddenly asked, his voice quavering with emotion.

John turned back to his son. He suddenly looked like an altogether different person. He was pale, nervous, and wide-eyed. He was the John who had thrust a pile of money and sweaters upon Caitlyn before pushing her out the front door. The change was so startling that she almost preferred the evil one. Or, as he'd put it, the happy one.

For a long minute, nobody moved or spoke. John's face contorted with indecision. He looked back and forth between Henry and Theodora with pitiful desperation. He looked like a dog that wanted to please his owners, but didn't understand what they wanted from him.

"Tell the truth," Caitlyn commanded sharply. John looked at her with fearful eyes.

Finally, he licked his lips, and then spoke in a hoarse, dry voice.

"Martin killed Beatrice."

"What?" Henry cried. "No. Impossible."

"It was an accident, of course."

Henry scrunched his eyes shut and shook his head, as if he could erase his father's words through sheer force of will. Theodora was gazing at John with a numb, vacant expression. Caitlyn glanced at the portrait of Martin on the other side of the study. Somehow, the new information changed it. Now it showed not a boy, but a killer.

"He was trying to show Beatrice that magic is safe," said John. "But chaos magic has never been safe." His voice was rasping, and his words were anguished.

"After it happened, Martin was wracked with guilt. He said he couldn't live with himself. I told him he was being too hard on himself, that it was an accident, and that the pain would ease, in time. I told him that, incidentally, I also killed my first lover by accident with magic. A muggle girl named Cara. I thought it would make him feel better, to know he wasn't alone."

Water was gathering in John's eyes as he remembered.

"I'll never forget the look on his face when I told him that. It was a look of horror... of disgust. Not only disgust with me, but with himself. He refused to talk to me after that. That was the last real conversation we ever had. I have often wondered whether he would be alive today if I hadn't told him about Cara. Surely he would still be alive if I had refused to teach him chaos magic."

A single tear rolled silently down John's pale cheek.

"Martin didn't only kill himself out of grief. He did it out of shame, for what he'd done, and for what he'd become."

He grimaced.

"My favorite son killed himself because he realized he was turning into me."

Theodora suddenly broke off from the circle and rushed toward John. Caitlyn instinctively gripped her dagger, expecting a fight. To her surprise, Theodora embraced him.

"Oh, John," she cried. "And you kept that all inside?"

They held each other tightly. Theodora was nearly a foot taller than John was. She held him against her chest, so that her chin rested on top of his head. John let out a long wail that became a sob. A moment later, both were weeping. Caitlyn watched, stunned by the change in both of them.

Theodora pulled away from John enough to look down into his eyes.

"I'm sorry, John. It's not true what I said, that you contaminated our sons. I only said that to hurt you. There's nothing wrong with you, just as there was nothing wrong with Martin. Martin was a beautiful boy, and only more so because of the gifts you gave him."

She stroked his wet cheek.

"The others don't know you like I do. I know the real John. The truth is, you have the biggest heart of anyone I've ever met. That's why you're always trying to shrink it."

John buried his face into her breast and melted into her arms. He sobbed noisily, moaning and shuddering.

Theodora lowered herself to the ground without letting him go. They both sat on the floor of the study, holding each other. She enveloped him like a mother bird protecting her chick beneath her wings.

"Martin!" John wailed into Theodora's arms. "My boy!" He convulsed with his sobs.

Caitlyn stared at them with disdain. She thought of the rotten corpse beneath the floorboards, and the open ribcage on the couch. Despite the change in John's attitude, she felt no trace of pity for him. If anything, his cries for attention only made her anger flare more hotly.

She looked at Henry beside her. His face was puffy and shiny from tears, and his gaze was unfocused.

"Do you pity him?" she asked.

"Huh?" Henry looked at her, disoriented. "Oh, I wasn't thinking of him, to be honest."

"But do you?"

Henry looked at his father pensively. Finally, he sighed.

"Sometimes I pity spiders even as I'm crushing them."

Caitlyn smiled out of the corner of her mouth, and her shoulders relaxed. Henry smiled, too. She was glad she'd told him about everything, even the rape. At the time, she'd thought it was an enormous risk. Now though, she saw that she had nothing to fear. She felt safer with Henry than even with two dozen magical bodyguards.

Blushing, she looked away. She suddenly felt self-conscious. She tried to steady herself on her feet. Something pulled on her heart like a rope in a game of tug-of-war.

Without further thought, she shot out one hand and took Henry's in hers. All the while, she refused to look at him, as if she were engrossed in John and Theodora's theatrics. She could feel Henry's shock, and his inquisitive eyes upon her. A moment later, though, he directed his gaze in the same direction as hers. He held her hand firmly, and stood close to her. They stood like that for a minute, side by side, holding hands.

Finally, Henry broke the silence.

"I think he'll send you home now."

Caitlyn swallowed, and nodded. A sentence hung in the air, thick and heavy between them, though neither spoke it.

I guess this means I'll never see you again.

Caitlyn felt herself being swept away by joy and sorrow in equal measure. Numb detachment crept about the corners of her mind, but she pushed it away. She squeezed Henry's hand and willed herself to stay connected to the present moment, confusing as it was.

Wilbur Croft spoke up from behind her. Startled and self-conscious again, Caitlyn let go of Henry's hand.

"I say, where did you learn that name—Zkanuthel, was it?"

She glanced at the professor, a burly, middle-aged man with an oily moustache. He'd readily absolved her of all the charges he'd laid against her, on her first night in 1863. Nevertheless, Caitlyn remained on her guard around him.

"It's just something I heard him call himself once."

"Hmm. I'd wager my sneakoscope collection that that's a demon's name. Though I couldn't tell you which one."

Caitlyn shrugged. She'd assumed Zkanuthel was some kind of delusion, or imaginary friend.

"To know a demon's name is to have considerable power over it," Croft went on. "And Coventry seemed deeply disturbed by the mere mention of the name."

"What are you saying?" asked Henry. "Are you saying my father is a demon?"

"I don't know."

"He acts like one," Caitlyn said flatly. "That's all that matters."

In the center of the room, John and Theodora had recovered themselves somewhat. They were still sitting on the floor, faces close, talking in hushed tones. Caitlyn turned away from the pair, and towards the men.

"We'll keep a close eye on him," said Croft. "Using every kind of subterfuge we have. If he tries to hurt someone again, we'll know about it, and we'll stop him."

Caitlyn's jaw clenched. She knew it was an empty promise. The wizards had refused to put John on trial for the same reason that the town of Coventry had tolerated him for the past twenty years. No prison could hold him. According to Azkaban's records, five times over the last four hundred years, a man named John, claiming to be an immortal chaos magician, had broken out of the high-security wizard prison shortly after being locked in. It was a travesty that he should walk away from his latest rampage unpunished. But he was like a bomb that no one wanted to set off. Caitlyn tried not to think about it. It made her blood seethe.

She stroked her sigil with her thumb, contorting the design on her pale skin. All this time, she had desperately wished to be rid of it. Meanwhile, it had been saving her life, albeit at a high price. Because of the sigil, John had spared her life. It was also because of the sigil that he'd been afraid to let her leave.

"Sure wish we could help you with that, Miss Caitlyn," said Croft, nodding to her wrist. "But I think Coventry was right about the *finem fati* charm. I've no means to remove it, and I'd probably only hurt you if I tried."

"It's fine," she muttered. She looked at Henry. His green eyes were sympathetic.

"I do wonder, though," she added, looking at Henry, "what exactly did he summon, with his fear ritual in the forest? What was his greatest fear? A woman he couldn't kill?"

Henry frowned, thinking. Then he shook his head.

"A child he couldn't protect," he answered quietly.

Caitlyn looked away and sniffed. She supposed it didn't matter now, anyway.

"Speaking of which," said Henry, turning to Croft, "There's a question I've been meaning to ask. Could you tell me, are there any wizarding schools for adults?"

Croft raised his bushy eyebrows.

"Why no, Lord Coventry."

"Oh," Henry sighed. His shoulders drooped.

"Though... there'd be no shortage of willing and competent tutors. If I'm understanding your meaning correctly."

Henry's eyes brightened again.

"To discover one's magic in adulthood, as you did," said Croft slowly, "is almost unheard of in the wizarding world. Considering that your only training has been in the dark arts, you would probably need personalized instruction, anyway."

Henry bit his lip, and nodded.

"But I could learn to do magic your way?" he asked. "The wizarding way?"

Wilbur Croft smiled. Caitlyn noticed that the wizards were chatting and milling about, now that the immediate danger had passed. A couple of them were attentively listening in.

"I should think so. But I must warn you, Lord Coventry, you won't encounter the kind of explosive progress you've made so far. The kind of magic you've been doing is not for beginners. It takes years to learn how to perform such magic safely. Many years of methodical, full-time study."

"Right." He nodded. "I've heard it's not easy," he said, glancing at Caitlyn.

"Is this what you want, Henry?" Caitlyn inquired with concern. "To be a wizard, along with all your other responsibilities? You'd have to lead a double life."

To her surprise, he smiled.

"I have no intention of leading a double life."

Croft's face darkened.

"You know it's against our laws to tell muggles about magic," he warned.

"Oh, no, you misunderstand me," said Henry quickly. "What I meant was..." he paused. Then he turned to Caitlyn, and spoke to her directly.

"I've already been leading a double life all this time, and I hate it. It wasn't until you arrived that I saw just how unhappy I was. I think you were right. I am more like my father than I knew. He's not the only one who's been wearing a mask."

Caitlyn took his hand again.

"Stop it, Henry, you're nothing like him."

Henry sighed.

"Be that as it may, I've already made my decision."

She squeezed his hand.

"Lucky for me," he said with a wink, "I have a cousin who would love to be the Earl of Coventry."

Henry beamed, and Croft patted him on the back so heartily that he wobbled on his feet.

Caitlyn laughed. It was an immense relief to laugh again. It was like wiping the dust off a valuable item that she'd forgotten was there.

"Come, Miss Holbrook," John called dully behind her.

Caitlyn whipped around and glared at him. John's voice was neither suave nor frightened. It was hollow.

"Come on. Let's perform the ritual now, before I change my mind."

Theodora was right beside John, her elbow hooked around his.

Caitlyn scowled, then immediately softened as she looked up at Henry. His eyes were glassy again, and his expression profoundly sorrowful.

She threw her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. Henry returned the embrace.

"Henry..." Theodora chided, but her voice was gentle.

Caitlyn clung to him, inhaling deeply, as if to soak up as many molecules of Henry as she could.

Finally, they parted. Caitlyn couldn't bear to look at Henry's face, for fear she might break down and cry. She looked down, then up at Theodora, who was watching them with a pout of disapproval.

"Mother, please," Henry sighed with exasperation. "Let's just agree to be disappointed in each other."

"Ha ha!" John laughed. "Now we're a real family!"

~

John stared dully at the sigil carved into the soil. His knees ached and his rear was numb from sitting in the same cross-legged position for over an hour. Uncomfortable as he was, though, he knew his pains were trivial compared to the enormity of his present task.

He hadn't slept a wink since he'd learned Caitlyn Holbrook was missing. That had been two days ago. He'd been so preoccupied with this and that, he hadn't even noticed March 6th, 1990 creeping up on him. Only when he heard of Caitlyn's disappearance on the evening of the 7th did he realize that the 6th had quite passed him by.

He'd always imagined that she'd be gone only an instant. Whoosh, off to 1863, and then whoosh, back to 1990. He'd had no plan for what he'd do if March 6th came and went, and Caitlyn did not reappear. Now, every member of the Hogwarts community was distraught over her disappearance.

He had long since decided that he wanted nothing to do with time travel magic. To dabble in it was risky, to put it mildly. According to the literature, no sorcerer had ever performed anything like time travel magic. It was one of Droessler's unsolvables, after all. The only research on the topic was theoretical, and it all suggested that meddling with the past was an extremely bad idea.

Six years ago, as if in a kind of trance, John had found himself accepting the job offer from Hogwarts. A few years after that, he'd found himself putting the sigil on Caitlyn's wrist exactly as he remembered it. From there, he'd let things take their course. He did not trust himself to change the past. He wasn't even sure he'd want to, if he could.

That had all been before Caitlyn Holbrook went missing.

For two nights, John had paced his apartment above the art studio, recalling details he'd spent the last one hundred twenty-seven years burying. He tried to recall the precise incantations he'd used to bring Caitlyn back, and then to send her forward. That final ritual at Croome—it had seemed to work at the time, hadn't it? So where was she now? Dead? Stuck between past and present?

Finally, on the third sleepless night, he could not restrain himself any longer. His determination not to meddle was overwhelmed by his restless agitation. As best he could recall, he had deliberately sent her back to March 6th. Not March 10th, not April 6th, but *March 6th*. The best explanation for why Caitlyn had not reappeared was that something had gone wrong.

And so John found himself in the forest, against his better judgment, surrounded by the same candlesticks and sitting on the same sigil that he'd drawn on the night of March 6th, 1863. He swayed involuntarily from time to time where he sat, as if physically battered by fatigue and anxiety.

He reached out to his past selves, to the one who had summoned Caitlyn on this very spot, and to the one who, from his study at Croome Court, had sent Caitlyn home. His face contorted and his stomach roiled as he reached out to the memory of John Coventry. As he had one hundred twenty-seven years ago, he challenged his greatest fear to enter the circle.

There could be no doubt now that Caitlyn Holbrook was his greatest fear.

He shuddered as he imagined what prison they might hurl him into, how infamous his name might become, once Caitlyn returned and told them all what happened. That was not what he feared most, though. What he feared most was the possibility that he would fail to accept his punishment like a man. That he might lose his temper, and in a frenzy, prove that he had not changed at all.

He would be a liar if he insisted that the only thing he felt that night was fear, though. A part of him buzzed with morbid anticipation. Finally, after one hundred twenty-seven years of uncertainty, this calamity would end, one way or another.

He even harbored the fantasy that perhaps, if he could witness Caitlyn's return, he might finally get an answer to the question that tormented him above all others: was Zkanuthel real?

Of course, the voice had felt real. The voice had appeared after that ritual in the church, and it had tormented him until it disappeared shortly after Caitlyn did. Perhaps it had been the voice of Zkanuthel. Then again, it was just as likely that John had merely driven himself mad. It would hardly be the first time that someone had driven themselves mad with a magic ritual. Perhaps it didn't matter, morally, whether the demon was real. At the very least John had called on the demon, and that in itself was an unforgivable crime.

Nevertheless, beyond all hope or common sense, he imagined John Coventry following Caitlyn into the future. Just as John Coventry had received her wounds, perhaps the spells cast on her would be cast on him, too. Then the three of them would stand here, on this sigil, and John Hennessy would put a hand on John Coventry's chin, and look him in the eyes, and say the magic words that would reveal whether he was, indeed, possessed by a demon. In a flash of flame and a plume of sulfur, Zkanuthel would finally appear, a monstrous hell beast with three heads and a flamed tongue, and together the Johns would subdue him, and Caitlyn would see that John was innocent! The demon had made him do it! John was innocent!

John swallowed. His throat was dry. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

This night wasn't about him. It was about Caitlyn. The only thing that mattered now was Caitlyn.

A cold wind rippled his hair and his robe, but he did not shiver. The cramps in his legs and his back faded into the background. While his stomach churned with anxiety, his abdominal muscles were strong and unwavering.

Caitlyn, come home. Hogwarts misses you. Your parents need you. Come home, Caitlyn. Chaos, bring her home. And let whatever may come, come.

In his mind's eye, John could see the old house on the edge of the town of Coventry. Thick dust painted the familiar rooms a hazy gray. Spiderwebs draped the rafters like nuptial veils, bedecked with dull gems that were merely the hollow sarcophagi of insects. John's gossamer curtains, which had once allowed him to see without being seen, now blossomed with mildew. The dank scent tickled his nostrils. The wallpaper peeled like scabs. The wind whistled through the roof, whose ribs were exposed and whose skin hung in tatters.

He was not alone. Dozens of eyes were watching him. Sunken and shadowed like Henry's. Silver like Martin's. Silently, they watched as John spun in panicked confusion. The eyes did not blink. His victims had died with their eyes open, and their eyes were still open. For one hundred twenty-seven years they had been open. The ghosts of his victims were watching, waiting, hating, disgusted that the only thing that stood between them and everlasting peace was John's incoherent self-pity.

Another cold breeze whipped around him, and it did not even chill him. In fact, he was radiating heat, trembling, and sweating. He felt energy sapping out of him, and he unclenched several muscles he didn't realize he'd been clenching. His vision went dark for a moment, and his lips grew numb and cold. A wave of dull, mild pain broke across his skull. As his vision cleared, he was not surprised to see Caitlyn standing before him, dressed in a green wizard's robe, pointing a wand at his forehead.

He did not stir where he sat. He merely looked up at her, and spoke in a dull, dead voice.

"It's March 10th, 1990. You've been missing for three days."

He twisted his right hand, and a transparent silver dog appeared at the edge of the circle.

"The dog will show you the way back to the castle. Go. It's not safe here."

Caitlyn's expression was hard to read. She glanced between John and the dog, her lips contorting in a grimace that might have been either hatred or fear.

"Avenge yourself against me all you like later," he sighed, exhausted. "But right now, you need to go."

It was true. John could feel the magic, always amplified and stimulated near the portal, was spectacularly volatile now. One impulsive thought might accidentally spark some catastrophic spell.

Caitlyn's eyes hardened. She gripped her wand so tightly that her knuckles were white, and the tip trembled slightly.

John looked up at her, doing his best to keep his face neutral.

Finally, Caitlyn took a step backward. Glancing behind her once or twice to avoid the candlesticks, she backed out of the circle. She kept her wand trained on John the entire time, even as she followed the dog into the night. He sighed, and his shoulders sagged with relief as he watched her disappear.

Then he suddenly felt a surge of eager anticipation. If John Coventry was coming, he would come now! John had to be careful not to let his longing materialize into a spell. In spite of himself, he craved a sign, any sign, that this miracle had been accomplished with demonic assistance. His heart ached for proof of Zkanuthel.

Of course, he didn't really want to encounter Zkanuthel. He merely wanted proof of his own innocence, or at least proof that he was not entirely guilty. He wanted someone to swoop down and exonerate him. But that was the opposite of what he deserved, and in a way, it was what he'd already been given. He'd been granted more than a century of unwarranted freedom, though, in all that time, he had not felt particularly free.

His little aches and pains returned as he waited. Eventually, he grew cold again, and his eyelids felt heavy. There was no demon, no spark, no sign. All he got for his trouble was the occasional hooting owl, and rustling of leaves, and the metallic buzz of insects. The animals were apparently untroubled by the disturbance in the spacetime continuum. In the end, only two creatures in the forest that night grasped that anything extraordinary had happened. Only two creatures paused to reflect on questions of time and fate, good and evil, guilt and innocence.

Innocence. Just a slip of the tongue from ignorance. Far from redemption. The word innocent, like the words empty and equal, begs for clarification. To be empty of. To be equal in. To be innocent of... this crime, that pain. There is no such thing as an innocent person. And yet because people feel guilt, they believe in innocence. Despite their fatigue, both John and Caitlyn lay awake in their beds that night, clutching their elbows, wondering whether innocence, once lost, can ever be regained.