

Familiar Things

Lia Habel

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Familiar Things/ Lia Habel. – 1st ed.

*For Joshua, who never forgot me.
For Gail, who was always there.
For Stella Price, who sees in me more than I see in
myself.*

1

The night my boyfriend was due to return from Currens, word got out that Summerlene Hayes had been forced to take a guinea pig as her familiar.

At first, I was ignorant of the budding drama. We were in the powder room at the Snow Hollow Country Club, which by itself was dramatic enough for me. It was the latest in a series of surreal and thrilling events that had begun five months ago when Vincent Olwen, the Mayor's son, bright and beautiful and *eighteen*, had tenderly slipped his hand under the collar of my sweater and pinned me with his Bonebell Senior High Student Council pin.

"You promise to wait for me, Everrose?" he'd asked, his blue eyes practically burning in the darkness. "Until I come back from the Layside?"

I'd felt a puff of air escape my lips, the warmth of my own breath, but I hadn't heard myself speak. I must have said, "Yes," because he'd smiled. My collarbone had tingled where he'd touched it; I'd nursed the sensation all the way home.

Now, as I stared at the silvery bat-shaped pin for the thousandth time, I felt that tingle again. That evening I'd fastened it to the satin lining of my beaded clutch, and every time I popped the purse frame apart, the pin winked in the light. It never failed to capture my attention.

Well, it didn't help that Brian Hyland was playing over the speakers. "Sealed With A Kiss." Oh, he was *finally* coming home. I'd missed him so much....

Rallying myself, I reached inside my clutch for my lipstick case. Although the dark-haired powder room attendant had yet to clear her throat at me—odd, as she'd already shooed half a dozen young witches away from the mirror—I figured I should get my act together.

Leaning close to the gilded mirror, I twisted the red bullet of lipstick up and parted my lips. *You want just a thin film of color*, I reminded myself. That's what the girl at the makeup counter at Cursewells had told me when I'd purchased it. I'd never worn lipstick before. *Wearing too much will make you look careless.*

Following her instructions, I smoothed the lipstick on and then grabbed a tissue from the box sitting on the counter under the mirror. Folding the tissue in half, I squeezed it between my lips to blot them. Then,

standing back, I admired the effect. It aged me slightly—but I still looked sixteen. Too short to be a model and on the skinny side of slender, with cornflower blue eyes and pale skin. Still, between the makeup and my mother, I thought I'd done well for my first ever visit to the country club. She'd taken me to Cursewells and bought my new party dress with tears in her eyes—embarrassing, but sort of sweet. She'd worked my fine, wheat-blond hair into a sleek chignon and let me borrow her pearls.

No. It was the hair that aged me, I realized with a thump of disappointment. Alas, there were three things in my life that consistently fell flat: half the spells I tried to cast on myself, half the spells I tried to cast on things *around* me, and my hair. It refused to hold a curl.

“Stars! *Priscilla!* There’s a fat old rat trying to crawl up your dress!”

The piercing shriek only confirmed my observation—because if the shock caused by a noise like that couldn’t curl my hair, nothing ever would. Whirling around, my midnight blue skirt whispering against the counter, I watched as Priscilla Opalcloak and her usual entourage scurried across the marble floor.

On the other side of the powder room, seated upon a little burgundy velvet chair, was my best friend. Summerlene looked utterly crestfallen—a look I didn’t recognize. Normally she was the most self-possessed, stylish, and ambitious witch I knew.

Which was why, when she’d hopped into the front seat of Mayor Olwen’s car alongside me, I’d marveled at her decision to pair a carpet bag with her glamorous scarlet dress.

Now, I saw the reason for it. The bag sat at her feet, open. Inside, a fawn-colored guinea pig was struggling to claw its way out.

Her chocolatey brown eyes met mine. Within them, there was an apology. They were nearly the same color as her glossy hair, dark points against her sun-freckled, olive skin. She was an effortless beauty, the sort of girl-next-door that young warlocks always seemed to go for. Her “obit bracelet” attested to that—the jangling collection of silver charms she wore on her left wrist, each bearing the initials of a boy with whom she’d gone steady.

Gone. Past tense. Ten charms to my lone pin.

And there was the rub. She hadn’t told me she’d found her familiar—I’d had no clue. And rather than get angry over it, my first thought was that this was normal, nothing personal. I was used to being sort of... benignly forgotten. Even by my best friend. I was always the last person to hear about her exploits. The one who initiated all the phone calls.

Of course... there was another explanation. One that made my heart skip a beat.

Of my long-anticipated sixteenth summer, only a week was left—and I was still familiarless. In fact, I was the only girl in the powder room without some sort of animal hanging off of her.

Summerlene knew that. And although she was forgetful, she wasn’t cruel.

Turning away from me, she set her shoulders back. Showtime. “She’s not a *rat*. She’s a guinea pig. Her name is Daisy.”

Priscilla looked dubious. Platinum blond and graceful, she reached up to stroke the arrow-shaped head of her snowy mink, Clementine. The witch wore a one-shouldered purple dress, allowing the animal to perch on her bare skin. “Goodness.” She was incapable of laughter; she tried anyway. “Gave me quite a scare there. I wasn’t aware you’d found your canary.”

“Why on earth have you got her crammed in that ugly handbag, Merle?” asked one of Priscilla’s companions, Julie Bentwood. Pig-nosed and mousey-haired, the girl was tragically outclassed by her own copper husky. He was a stunning dog, but his name escaped me. “She’s no good to you in there.”

“I guess...” Summerlene reached into her bag and hefted the guinea pig out. The thing squeaked, shivering between her hands. “I’m still getting used to it. I only got her last night.”

“Hmm.” Priscilla’s white nose carved an arc through the air. “Yes. I’m sure that’s the reason.”

Julie smirked, and lifted a finger. At the end of it, around her manicured red claw of a nail, a sparkling purple mist began to gather. Her dog growled; she ignored him. “But what if someone decided to hex you? Your familiar’s supposed to *protect* you, after all.”

As if to prove her point, Daisy’s head whipped up, her gimlet eyes settling on the mist. Squorking furiously, she grabbed a fold of Summerlene’s dress between her teeth and began to worry it back and forth.

“Hey!” Summerlene grabbed the creature, tugging her away before she could do any real damage. “Quit it, Julie!”

That’s when I forgave her. Snapping my purse shut, I moved through the crowd to her side.

Laughing, Julie let the spell dissipate. “Is *that* how she’s going to alert you to an incoming spell? Gosh, what’s she going to do to make *you* think twice about casting one on somebody? At least my dog can overturn my cauldron!”

“It’ll poop on her,” another witch, unfamiliar to me, giggled from behind her hand. Her arm was bent at an angle, supporting a green snake. “Spell out a message with the pellets.”

“Send a hex my way,” Priscilla said, raising one exquisite eyebrow. “I’m curious now. And since you got your familiar so late in the season, you can’t have much practice... so you can’t do much harm.”

Summerlene lifted her head and narrowed her eyes—and my stomach dropped. She was considering it. Envy made my cheeks go hot as I realized that she *could* cast spells on other people, now, if she wanted. From the “time of understanding,” which for Summerlene and I had been around the age of four, children were forbidden to do anything magical to other people or animals—save during dire emergencies. Not even with their permission. We could only use magic on objects or ourselves.

But when you gained your first familiar at the age of sixteen, the prohibition was lifted. It meant you were coming of age... growing up.

Founders. I felt like such a child. I’d always known I was a mediocre witch; now I had proof.

“Stop,” I said, putting a hand on Summerlene’s shoulder. “It’s not worth it.”

My voice was soft and quiet—barely audible over Daisy’s continued squeaking. But for the first time, the other girls seemed to see me. Priscilla treated me to a brow lift of my very own. Julie studied me like I was some sort of twisted, forsaken thing conjured from a nether realm. “Says wh—”

“Ladies.” The attendant stepped out from behind her little table of mints and perfume bottles. “Far be it from me to lecture you, but that young witch is right. The powder room is not the place for such behavior.”

For a few seconds, silence reigned. The other witches peered sharply at the attendant, and she straightened, shoring herself up against their unspoken threats. Most of the girls at the club that evening were from rich, powerful clans within All Hollows County—friends and family of the warlocks who’d be

returning alongside Vincent. The attendant was a workaday witch. In their eyes, she was no more important than Daisy—and had no more authority.

Ultimately, it was Priscilla who deigned to nod at the attendant, and to remove herself from the powder room. Her clique followed, exiting the room in a flurry of bouncing skirts. The attendant relaxed and returned to her station. A handful of witches who'd been watching from the attached bathroom hurried out and crowded in front of the mirror, gossiping and casting open glances at Summerlene.

Once they were gone, Summerlene stood up and sighed. "I'm sorry."

I didn't respond for a moment. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was embarrassed." Summerlene dumped Daisy on the chair. The rodent dashed about in a circle, a tiny bundle of nerves. "All the hoping I did, all the daydreaming, all the wishing spells I bought at the five and dime... and this is what I get."

"Really?" I couldn't help it. "Are you sure you didn't keep mum because I haven't found my familiar, yet?"

"No!" Summerlene blinked at me in surprise. "I... Founders, that didn't even occur to me. I forgot."

Of course she did. "Well, the guinea pig's out of the b—"

"Everrose." Summerlene held up a finger. "If you finish that sentence, I swear I will throttle you."

"Gosh, making friends right and left tonight, aren't you?"

"I'm *sorry*, I just..." Summerlene looked around, her brow furrowing as she realized *just* how many witches had witnessed the scene.

I decided to let it go. "Where'd you find her?"

"Old McGinty's cider mill. Last night after work, Dad threw me in the back of the car and told me we weren't going to stop driving until we found my familiar. We stopped for a drink, and I saw her there. One of his daughter's, kept in a cage in the barn. So not only did I get to experience the humiliation of making my first Connexion with a *guinea pig*," Summerlene huffed, glaring at the furry thing, "but I got the *fun* of stealing a little girl's pet. Everrose, you never heard such sobbing. You'd think I'd picked the pest up and popped its head off right in front of her."

Wincing, I said, "Well, your rights trump hers. Still, poor girl."

"Trust me, I wasn't gloating!" She leaned closer to me. "I tried to dump her a block away from my house. Last night, around midnight. But she followed me! And every time I try to leave her in my room, she goes bananas."

"Well, that's how the Connexion works. A familiar can't protect you if it's not with you."

"I know, but... Everrose, I could just die. I mean, we're supposed to use them to practice spells directed at other people, too. But to actually *get* a guinea pig to use as a *magical guinea pig*?" Her eyes grew brighter, and I wondered if she might cry. "And *how on earth* am I going to coordinate her with my prom dress?"

Sympathy made my chest feel heavy. I opened my mouth, prepared to say something soothing....

And that's when a horrible thought struck me.

If at this late hour Summerlene had merited only a guinea pig... what kind of creature was *I* doomed to get?

"At least Vince has a bat!"

Closing my eyes, I forced myself to concentrate. “Vincent,” I reminded her. I hated nicknames, even though they were all the rage. Merle to everyone else, Summerlene was always Summerlene to me. Vincent would never be Vince. And I detested the names “Rosie” and “Evie” more than I could possibly express. “Besides, the only good thing he ever has to say about Leatherhyde is that he could stand in for our school mascot.”

“What? Why? Compared to a guinea pig, a bat’s tops. Heck, at this point I’d take anything with wings!”

“Look, let’s...” I opened my eyes again and took a deep breath. The idea of rating something below a guinea pig terrified me, but I couldn’t do anything about it. Finding your familiar was a numbers game—that’s all. And it was bound to happen before school started. I could let my anxiety launch me into orbit later. “Let’s head back outside. What’s done is done. If you blow your top here, it’ll only come back to bite you.”

Summerlene took a few moments to collect herself. As I watched, her brow smoothed and her shoulders dropped. “I guess you’re right. I feel like such a drip. Here you invited me along, and I went and ruined the evening.”

“You didn’t.” I found her hand and squeezed it. “I’m sorry you didn’t get what you wanted. I wish I could fix it. But I’m not allowed to cast spells on guinea pigs yet. I’d probably just turn her into a pig-pig, anyway.”

Summerlene smiled at me, and then picked Daisy up with a reluctant, “Ugh.” I reached out to stroke the guinea pig’s coarse beige coat, and she readjusted herself in Summerlene’s arms with a grunt. “Would you mind if I left my bag here, ma’am?” Summerlene asked the attendant. “I’d rather not walk all the way back to the coat check. There’s fifty cents in it for you.”

The attendant shook her head. “Kick it under the chair.”

“Swell. Thanks.” Summerlene did so, and paused to adjust the seam of her stocking before leading the way to the door. I followed, my crinoline-buoyed skirt swaying about my knees.

While the powder room was full of burgundy velvet and gilded furniture, most of the rooms in the country club were dark and opulent—their walls covered with walnut paneling, their floors overlaid with black marble, and their corners host to enormous fireplaces of black slate. The building was mostly empty, as the festivities were taking place outside. We hurried through it, hand in hand, and exited through a large pair of leaded glass doors located at the end of the main hallway. It was then that the collective chatter of a hundred witches and warlocks hit us, mixed with animal noises and the swiny beats of Klaus Cumberlitch’s Starsight Orchestra.

I caught sight of Vincent’s father by the buffet table, and tugged Summerlene along. She needed no urging—he might be old enough to be *her* father, but she was completely smitten by him. When he’d invited me, and told me to extend the invitation to one more girl—for propriety’s sake—I’d enjoyed watching her reaction. She’d practically clawed the ceiling in jubilation.

“I’m hoping to address that issue after the next election,” he was telling a pudgy, white-haired warlock. Roderick Olwen *was* a handsome man, with dark brown hair, a square jaw, and a face that looked like it could be used to beat less masculine warlocks into physical submission. Dressed in a dapper three-piece suit, a cigarette in one hand and a self-recording pocket notebook in the other, he looked every inch the politician. “Because you’re right, Mr. Morris. Protecting our county’s naturally occurring mythportals from

shortsighted developers is fundamentally necessary for the continued health and safety of our more advanced magical practitioners.”

Heedless of the notebook jotting down Mayor Olwen’s part of the conversation, the old warlock grabbed his hand and shook it. The notebook fell to the grass. “I’m very glad to hear you say that! Blessings upon you and your household, sir!”

“And upon yours,” Mayor Olwen said, doing his best not to lose his cigarette, as well.

As I neared his side first, I knelt down to retrieve the notebook. Mayor Olwen’s words were still melting onto the page in blue ink. I shut the metal cover, where the year was engraved—1958—and looked up.

A six-foot-long millipede, black as night and wide as a woolen scarf, was coiling around Mayor Olwen’s feet. The insect reared up toward my face, his antennae twitching, and uttered a low hiss.

“Hello, Clackwell,” I said, before straightening up and offering the notebook to the Mayor. Summerlene eyed his familiar distrustfully, and kept her own cradled in her arms.

“Thank you, Miss Morgantwill.” Mayor Olwen waved Mr. Morris off, then took the notebook and pocketed it inside his vest. “I was wondering where you’d run off to.”

“We were in the powder room.”

“Yes, off chatting with the *exemplary* young ladies of this community.” Summerlene was suddenly all lashes and teeth. “So, before we left you were going to tell us all about your reelection campaign. Isn’t that right?”

Mayor Olwen shot me an amused look. I smiled back softly, still unused to receiving such looks from him. When I’d first started going out with Vincent, right after my sixteenth birthday, his father had *hated* me. At least that’s how it’d seemed. He’d refused to look at me the few times I saw him in public, and refused to let me speak to his son whenever I caught him on the family phone line. He was never openly contemptuous, but whenever I was forced to interact with him, I couldn’t shake the feeling that he wanted me *gone*.

But then... everything changed.

Last March, Vincent had invited me to eat dinner at his house. I still had no idea how I’d acted, what I’d said—I was so nervous, the entire evening was a blur. To this day, I couldn’t even recall what the Olwen family dining room looked like.

But whatever I’d done, whatever I’d said—it’d worked.

The next day, Mayor Olwen had sent me a beautiful box of expensive sewing notions and a note apologizing for his past behavior. Now, I counted him as one of the kindest people I knew.

Addressing Summerlene, the Mayor said, “It’s a rare young person who tries so hard to make an old man feel included in the conversation. But even I’d rather talk about something more interesting.” He inclined his head toward Daisy. “Such as... your new companion?”

Summerlene covered Daisy’s head with her hand and frowned. “I think elections are interesting.”

“Two against one,” I said, earning a chuckle from the Mayor.

Summerlene peered at me, wordlessly informing me that I was stealing her hopeless crush’s attention and that this was unacceptable, before nattering on. “You see, I’m eager to take my student government

experience at Thornreel Junior High and use it to pitch myself into the big leagues. I was class president two years running.”

“Were you, Miss Hayes?” Mayor Olwen glanced back at Summerlene, his smile fading. They were as rare and delicate as night-blooming flowers, his smiles. “This is something you should discuss with my son, I think.”

“Yes, but you know, he must have gotten his skills from *someone*. So I’d love to pick your brain.”

“I must disabuse you of this notion. My son is naturally brilliant. I had nothing to do with it. Ask any father, he’ll tell you the same thing.” Puffing on his cigarette, he cast his eyes up the hill that led to the nearby forest. “Meanwhile, ladies... I think the Ward is unraveling.”

Heart thumping, I looked. Snow Hollow was just that—one of the thousands of hollows that made up All Hollows County—and the country club lay at its lowest point. The forest around the club rose at a gentle grade toward Fourstones Field, where the enchanted stones that secured the Nestle Ward to our side of time and space were located. There—toward the east—I could see the light show that indicated something was passing through the Ward, the usual ground-bound aurora of glowing colors.

“They’re coming through!” an older witch shouted. Political gambits and flirtation forgotten, Summerlene grabbed my hand and shook it, grinning.

The band struck up, even as most people abandoned the dance floor for our end of the field. Two warlocks in tan suits, each carrying a large black sack, moved toward the trees. The roar of conversation died down. Every witch and warlock in attendance watched the edge of the golden-leafed forest, breathless with anticipation. Above us all, the stars glittered in a clear sky.

Inside my head, I screamed with excitement.

Perhaps ten minutes later, I saw them. A group of eleven young warlocks, accompanied by two blue-uniformed Wardens, and shadowed by their familiars. Each boy wore casual slacks and a collared shirt topped with a sweater or letter jacket.

An eagle screamed. A wolf howled. A cheer erupted from the crowd, and a few of the boys lifted their hands and waved. A couple had big metal flashlights, which they shone in our direction. They stopped for a few minutes to hand over their luggage to the tan-suited warlocks—members of the Adoption Bureau, I knew, who were confiscating their things to put in quarantine—but afterward they broke into a run, headed for the country club.

The cheering grew louder as the boys joined the party. Parents rushed forward, and I heard their merry shouts as they were reunited with their sons. I could scarcely breathe. I couldn’t see Vincent, but I knew he must be there—because above me, his tall father broke into another rare smile.

The music crescendoed, flourished, and stopped. Pencil-moustached and full of pep, Klaus Cumberlitch grabbed the microphone and cried out, “Welcome home, boys! Tell us—how’d you enjoy 2015?”

2

“Having partaken in the tradition of Cur—”

The big silver microphone squealed. Up on stage, Billy Illengast pushed it away from his mouth and made an exaggerated “oops” face, eliciting laughter from the crowd. Klaus Cumberlitch twirled a finger in the air and muttered to himself. His finger glowed; the squeal died.

“Thanks, Mr. Cumberlitch.” Billy was a broad lad with dark skin and a pleasant face. Fullback for the Bonebell Bats, he was appropriately complemented in size by his familiar, a gray wolf named Craven. Yet, he was one of those boys I always thought of with a sisterly affection—better known for cleaning out old witches’ gutters and volunteering at the Black Cat Relief Society than starting fights.

Clearing his throat and assuming a solemn expression, Billy waited for the crowd to settle down. Once it had, he started again. “Having partaken in the tradition of Currens, and having been permitted to experience the Layside and all that it contains, I hereby renounce its ways and return to the community of All Hollows older, wiser, and fully committed to the ways of magic. I swear upon the spirits of the Great Founders that I will uphold the traditions, laws, and rights of our land.”

A smattering of applause punctuated this speech, and Billy smiled. Still, that was what he was *supposed* to say—the reentry Pledge he’d had to memorize. Once it was over, he could add anything he liked. “But I’m gonna dream about Laysider food for the rest of my life, I’ll tell you that! Zowie! They deep fry *butter*, Mom. Can you believe it?”

Laughter rang out again. Beside me, Summerlene whispered, “Fried butter? A chocolate malt says he disfigures himself trying to whip some up. I weep for the girl who ends up as his kitchen witch. That boy has a hollow leg.”

She would know—his initials were on her bracelet. I shook my head absently at her, not caring. In fact, I was paying only the barest attention to what was going on around us.

Something wasn’t right.

Vincent... wasn’t Vincent.

Standing next to his father, it was obvious that Vincent wasn’t related to Mayor Olwen by blood. In contrast to those of the older warlock, Vincent’s features were poetic and elegant, with arched eyebrows, an

aquiline nose, and a narrow, cleft chin that I loved to smother with kisses whenever he'd let me. Short black hair waved over his head, forming little valleys and hillocks that my fingers longed to skim over—no. To sink into, to tangle up and relish, like the lush floor of a black and welcoming forest.

I hoped no one in the audience was a telepath.

As if *he* could read my thoughts, Vincent gave me a curious glance. His eyes never failed to make my heartbeat erratic. They were startlingly blue, so intense that I sometimes found myself unable to meet them directly.

But at the moment, that wasn't what was troubling me.

For the fifteen minutes Vincent had been reunited with us he'd not smiled, spoken, or touched anyone. Or *anything*. He'd just *stood* there, rigid and ramrod straight, almost as if he were determined to keep himself under martial control. It was completely unlike him—and not at all how the other young warlocks were acting. Throughout the crowd I could see boys hugging their friends, laughing low, and predatorily eyeing the chafing dishes on the buffet table.

Sensibility bested by worry, I looked into his eyes. *What's the matter?* I asked him in my mind, hoping my thoughts would somehow translate to my face.

But Vincent's eyes told me nothing. They communicated *nothing*. Oh, I could see emotions swirling within them—pain. Confusion. Even love. But those emotions remained trapped, like shards of glitter caught in glass. It was clear that he was making no attempt to silently broadcast them to me.

Finally, he smiled at me—but the distance in his eyes gave me the chills.

After a long second, Vincent turned his head. The motion was awkward, almost as if I were an overbearing stranger on a bus and he was trying to find a polite way to ignore me. My throat went dry. What was going *on*?

Around us, there was a final massive swelling of applause. Billy was finished. He was the last to go—Vincent had been the first. He'd practically leapt onto the stage, and delivered the Pledge in a barking, hurried sort of way. Like he just wanted to get it over with. He hadn't even lingered long enough to add his own thoughts.

"Welcome home," his father said, thumping him on the shoulder. Vincent grimaced. "By the Founders, I missed you."

"I missed you, too." Vincent bestowed another mask-like smile on Mayor Olwen, even as he edged away from the man. "All of you. It's a relief to be back."

"Go on, go on..." His father waved him toward me. In the background, the band picked up again. "Don't be shy. I accept that I've slipped down a few rungs on the reunion priority ladder."

I held still, waiting for Vincent to come closer.

He didn't. Instead he hung back, evaluating me like a wary kindergartener might a substitute teacher.

Hot with embarrassment, I opened my mouth to beg off. But nothing came out. My eyes darted to Mayor Olwen. His son was ill. Or bewitched. Or *bewarlocked*. Something was wrong; he had to help him.

My distress must have been evident, for uneasiness deepened the age lines criss-crossing the Mayor's face. For a moment, I felt relief. It wasn't *me*. I was perfectly capable of nonverbal communication. "Vincent?" he asked, turning to his son.

Vincent didn't acknowledge his father. He just continued to stare at me, seemingly *through* me.

And then... warmth flooded his eyes. His scarily impassive shell started to crack. It was like watching a sleepwalker awaken. With a blink and a breath, he returned to his body. His eyes once more had life in them; his voice betrayed the presence of a soul. "Everrose?"

By this point, everyone was looking at him. Even Clackwell wriggled his antennae in a way that seemed to say, "*This biped is not right in the head.*"

"Of course it's me," I said, stepping closer. "Vincent, are you feeling okay?"

"Did you hit your head on the way through the Ward?" Summerlene asked.

"No, I just..." Vincent rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, and then lifted his head. That's when I got a good look at his face.

He looked so *tired*.

No. Not just tired. *Haunted*. There were bags under his eyes, and his skin wasn't just pale, like mine—it was positively *sallow*.

"You're exhausted!" I moved forward, eager to embrace him.

Vincent's eyes widened, and he took a step back. Grabbing my hands, he muttered, "It's all right."

At least he was touching me. "No, no it's not! Are you sick?"

Mayor Olwen reached out and caught Vincent's arm, removing him from my grasp and turning him around. His brown eyes narrowed as he scrutinized his son. "You had that good of a time, eh?"

"No!" Vincent was offended. "No, it's nothing like that. No drink, no dope."

"Are you *sure*?" The Mayor didn't sound convinced. Vincent attempted to extricate himself from his father's grip; the warlock refused to let him go.

Summerlene gave me a knowing look. I felt the blood drain from my face. Currens was known as a pretty wild time. The summer before senior year, young witches and warlocks—usually separated by gender, always organized into groups—were allowed to travel to the Layside, alone, to judge for themselves what it was like. Sheltered in All Hollows since birth, they were nonetheless given the opportunity to immerse themselves in the world from which our forefathers had escaped.

They also had the option to leave All Hollows and remain there. If they wanted. But to do so, they'd have to submit themselves to the removal of their magical powers, lest they give the rest of the community away or fall prey to the temptation to use magic to manipulate the Laysider masses.

Vincent had pinned me before he'd left, begged me to wait for him, be true to him, but... if there was another girl, outside the Ward, realistically I'd never find out about her. Rumor was a lot of boys banked on that. And maybe ignorance was better.

The look on my face must've given me away, though. Good looks aside—as Vincent freed himself and turned back to me, the reason I *loved* the boy became apparent. His expression faltered, then melted—as if the emotional center of his brain had been hit with a sledgehammer of a hex. A mixture of concern and self-reproach entered his eyes. "I'm *fine*. I just haven't slept well the past few weeks, is all. I was excited to come home. I almost thought about going ahead of the other boys. I..." His voice thickened. "Everrose, I'm sorry. Here I don't deserve you, and I'm acting like a fool. Forgive me."

Of all Vincent's physical attributes, the one I loved best was his voice. It was already a man's voice, silky-smooth and yet deliciously firm, capable of curling around consonants and turning vowels into

hypnotic suggestions that robbed me of the desire to do anything other than remain at his side, a gawping mess.

Ensnared by it, seduced by it, I decided to believe him. “Maybe we should go, then. I think you need to rest.”

He smiled wearily, and reclaimed my right hand. The motion banished my fears. “Yeah. Yeah, I think that’s a good idea.”

“Well, I don’t.” Mayor Olwen frowned, and reached into his jacket for his cigarette case. “Half the people here are waiting to pay their respects to *you*, Vincent. You should at least make a tour through the crowd.”

“Father, I—”

“I know you’re tired, but it’d be rude to leave right now. *And*,” he stressed, opening the case and selecting a cigarette, “I insist that you dance at least *once* with Miss Morgantwill. I think that’s only fair, given how you’ve worried her.”

“Oh, no.” Sometimes Mayor Olwen was *too* kind. “He doesn’t need to.”

Vincent’s brow wrinkled. “Father, I’m *beat*. Everrose obviously understands.”

“Did something in my voice make it sound like any of this is up for discussion?”

Though his tone remained oddly breezy, I could tell at once that we were dealing with the old Mayor Olwen—an emotional brick wall that stretched from sea to shining sea and up to heaven, impassable. Vincent faced his father head-on, his eyes unreadable—he was more intimate with this side of Mayor Olwen’s personality than anyone. What the two wordlessly communicated to one another, I couldn’t begin to guess. I figured a great deal of it was unpleasant.

Summerlene and I shared a bewildered glance. But before we could say anything, Vincent nodded at his father and tightened his grip on my hand, pulling me toward the dance floor.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But I’m not sure what’s going on.”

“It’s all right.”

“Is your father upset with me again?”

“No.”

“We don’t have to dance. Vincent, I’m worried about you.”

“Leave it be,” Vincent told me. He didn’t sound happy.

Our journey through the crowd was interrupted several times by well-wishers. Each time, Vincent shook hands and exchanged a few words with his usual aplomb. He took after his adoptive father, in that regard. He was able to turn his personality on a dime, to shift from annoyed and tired to warm and welcoming in the space of a blink. Yet the longer I listened to him, the more strain I heard in his voice; the longer I looked at him, the more signs of fatigue I saw.

By the time we stepped on the dance floor, I was even more concerned about him.

“Didn’t you have fun?” I asked, as Leatherhyde joined us. The little brown bat fluttered to a stop over Vincent’s head, and then shot down to claim his shoulder. As my fingers slid over the shoulder seam of Vincent’s maroon sweater, the creature nuzzled against them. I couldn’t help but smile a little. He had missed me.

Vincent took my right hand in his left, and placed his right hand on my waist. He kept me a respectable distance away as we began to slow dance, but closer than was truly proper. I opened my mouth, ready to crack a joke about Mrs. Walterwind's puritanical dance class back at Thornreel and how she'd made us all practice with rulers enchanted to levitate between our torsos... but in the end, I decided not to. It didn't feel appropriate. "Didn't you have fun, Vincent?" I asked again.

The band began to play a cover of "Please Love Me Forever"—though Klaus Cumberlitch was no Bobby Vinton. Vincent finally answered my question. "No."

As we turned, my eyes landed on Mayor Olwen. The warlock was watching us intently, his unlit cigarette in his hand. "Why not? What happened?"

Vincent leaned forward and pressed his forehead to mine. "It's difficult to explain."

I curled my fingers into his sweater. Now that we were away from his father, he was acting a little more like himself. Less restrained. "Was it something you saw? Someone you met? Where did you go?"

"Please, Everrose..." Gazing into my eyes, he whispered, "I don't mean to hush you. Founders, I missed your soft little voice. But I don't want to talk about it. Let me enjoy this. Let me feel *happy*. For one dance, all right?"

My anxiety plunged out of my heart and into my stomach, making me feel dizzy. Still, I told him, "Of course."

"You're so beautiful right now." His nose brushed mine. "I'm sorry if I'm acting screwy. It's not you. I can't believe I almost forgot..."

I flushed, my cheeks prickling as I realized how close his lips were. Weirdly enough, though, I felt my heart rate slow. "Forgot what?"

He hesitated. Then, he drew me closer. "How much I love holding you."

Well. He could take all the time he wanted, so long as he kept telling me things like that.

Vincent swayed with me, apparently content with silence. But I wasn't. After a few more seconds, I spoke up again. "I mean, as long as you tell me *sometime*. I hope you at least got out of the Allegheny Forest. You're not mad because you wandered in circles for three months, are you?"

He laughed. The sound was sharp, but I could tell he wasn't annoyed with me. "No. I promise you, I roved far and wide. I was a regular vagabond."

Grateful for that, I danced on. I wanted to hear his stories, but I knew I'd get the chance to amass my own soon enough. The Nestle Ward—the protective spell that "nestled" a county of some three hundred thousand square miles into a single square mile of Layside territory—was located somewhere between the Allegheny River and Route 666, in a mysterious land known as Pennsylvania. But I'd also heard of places like Paris, and London, and something called the Big Apple, and I was eager to see them all.

As we moved to the music, Vincent's fingertips stroked the side of my waist, tracing the zipper that fastened the girdle I wore beneath my dress. My eyelids fluttered at his touch. His skin was hot and soft—so familiar. He smelled of wool, warm skin, and spent magical energy—residue from the Ward. A sickly-sweet smell, like syrupy spring flowers left to rot in a vase.

"You still haven't found your familiar?" he asked.

He'd noticed. "No."

“Good.” He tightened his hold on my waist. “That means I don’t have to watch you pet and cuddle something else, yet.”

There. That was Vincent. Laughing, relieved, I met his eyes. Gently urging Leatherhyde aside, I stepped a tiny bit closer and moved to slide my hand from the front of his shoulder to the back. I didn’t mean to do anything improper—only continue dancing.

But before I could, he ripped himself out of my arms. “Don’t!”

Time seemed to stand still. He might have slapped me across the face—that’s how my mind and body reacted. I recoiled, half-frozen. What on earth had just happened?

“Are you all right?” I managed to ask.

Vincent stared at me for a few seconds, his eyes filling with regret. I expected that he’d recover, apologize, explain—like he always did. He was always so worried about me. So concerned for my happiness.

But then he walked past me, leaving me alone on the dance floor.

The heat that had previously kissed my cheeks fanned throughout my entire body, and I felt the dress shields pinned under my armpits growing cold with sweat. My eyes started to sting, and I tried to blink the sensation away. I’d never worn mascara before, either; as tears threatened, I questioned the appeal.

I was confused. People were looking, and I was so, so confused. What had I done?

“Everrose.”

Summerlene had come to rescue me. Daisy was nowhere to be seen. She hooked her arm through mine and led me away from the dance floor, silent and stony-faced. After a few steps, I saw where she was taking me—around the side of the building, toward the parking lot.

“What happened?” she asked, once we were beyond the chatter and noise of the ongoing party.

“I don’t know,” I said, my voice hitching. “I just tried to dance closer to him...”

“We’re leaving. Mayor Olwen marched Vince to the car. One of the country club attendants is going to bring our things from inside.”

The walk across the gravel lot seemed to take an eternity. Mayor Olwen’s car was enormous, so he’d had to park it at the very rear of the lot. It was a vicious-looking thing, his black 1932 Daimler Double Six Sport Saloon. The car’s engine compartment was longer than the actual cab—should he ever have to cart a dead body around, it looked like it’d be easier for him to stuff it under the hood than inside the trunk. And the silvery hood ornament was in the shape of a rhinoceros’s *entire head*. Next to the modern, candy-colored ‘50s models on the drive, his car was the motoring equivalent of a gangster grandpa packing double wands.

Absorbed in my own misery, I didn’t realize that an argument was taking place inside one of the other cars until we were upon it. In the backseat of a cerulean Ford Thunderbird, Julie Bentwood was screeching at Buddy Menlow, one of the boys recently returned from Currens. He was a freckled warlock who wore his russet hair in a ducktail—though the blows she was landing with her lipstick case, her powder compact, her tissue box, anything out of her purse that Buddy had yet to magically freeze in mid-flight were making a wreck of it. Her pink purse hovered near the upper edge of the rear window; he’d obviously managed to hit *it* with a spell, but not the contents. “I told you, baby!” he shouted. “I told you we should break it off before Currens!”

“Cad!” she shouted, nailing him with her nail file. In the front seat, her dog barked. “Creep!”

Summerlene rolled her eyes, and pulled me along. As we neared the Daimler, the argument faded away. And another one took its place.

“I can’t believe you’re acting this way. What has gotten into you?”

“I don’t know.” Vincent’s voice was cold.

“That’s not an answer. What’s *wrong*? I can’t help you if you don’t tell me.”

Summerlene and I slowed our pace as a strange slapping sound echoed from the direction of the car. It was now visible, parked under an overhanging oak. On the other side of it, their heads just clearing the top of the cab, Vincent and Mayor Olwen stood together. With his right arm, Mayor Olwen held tight to a squealing, wriggling Daisy. I soon figured out that the Mayor must have slapped his other hand against the car in frustration.

“Nothing’s wrong. I just want to go home.”

“Those people are my *constituents*, Vincent. I’ve always told you that I’ll never put politics ahead of you, but that I expect a certain amount of maturity from you in return. To have you just walk away like th—”

“Oh, so that’s why I have to let them feel like they’re kissing up to *you* by pretending I’m grateful to get their attention? Like shaking their hand’s the best thing to ever happen to me? I’ve told you before, I’m not your sidekick!”

“No, but you *are* my family.” Mayor Olwen trailed off for a second, before raising his voice. “Is this about Miss Morgantwill? Do you not fancy her anymore?”

“No!” Vincent shouted. “Just... leave her out of this. I love her. I swear. I love her so much it *hurts*.”

I held my breath, my chest burning. Then why had he run from me?

“Good! Glad to hear it!” his father shouted back—and although his voice was rough and terribly loud, within it I could hear real relief. “So what *is* the issue?”

“I should have come back weeks ago.” Vincent put a few feet of distance between himself and the car, and slid his hand behind his neck. Leatherhyde took to the air. “I should have left the others there.”

“Why?”

“Because...” Vincent released a breath. In the space of a second, his tone changed. It became softer, more despairing. “It wasn’t like I thought it would be.”

“So this is about Currens?” Mayor Olwen straightened. “Did something serious happen? To you? To a Laysider?”

“No. I just...” When he turned back, Vincent saw us. He went silent.

Following his line of sight, Mayor Olwen sighed. He opened the rear door. “We’ll discuss this at home.”

Suddenly, someone coughed. Summerlene and I turned to find the black-haired powder room attendant standing behind us. In her hands, she carried Summerlene’s carpet bag and two black coats. For the first time, I spotted her familiar—a large praying mantis, riding on her neck under her hair. “Here you are, girls.”

“Thanks.” Summerlene fished a handful of quarters out of her bag for the attendant, before taking my arm and leading me to the car.

The drive back to Stoneset Hollow was awkward. Summerlene sat up front with the Mayor, leaving Vincent to sit beside me in the back. I couldn't bring myself to look at him, and so I stared out the window at the darkness, at nothing.

This was so unlike him. And that's what frightened me. He'd told his father that he loved me—a touching thing. But even if his love hadn't changed, that didn't mean *he* hadn't.

And what if something awful had happened to him on the Layside? Like the Mayor put it—I couldn't help Vincent if I didn't know what the matter was.

After ten or fifteen minutes had passed, I dared to peek over my shoulder. He was watching me. Vincent favored me with a tight smile and offered his hand, sliding it across the black leather of the seat, palm up. *I'm sorry*, he mouthed.

My heart almost burst. I took his hand, but I didn't feel it.

I didn't let myself cry until I was safe behind the arched red door of my family's house on Tinselfrost Street. The second the deadbolt was in place, I indulged the tears that wanted to come. So far, my sixteenth summer was shaping up to be one of the worst of my life. My boyfriend was acting strange, I'd been humiliated in front of everyone, my familiar had yet to show up....

"Freeze! Hands in the air!"

Screaming, I whirled around. My father, George, stood in the middle of the pitch-black living room, yellow energy pulsing over his fingers. The light reflected off his spectacles, hiding his eyes. Beside him his familiar, a German shepherd named Ears, started to bark.

"Dad!" I yelled. "It's me!"

At once, the hex poofed out of existence. Dad swore as he bumped into a table, knocking one of Mom's porcelain lamps over in the process. Ears went nuts, barking fit to beat the band. When Dad got the lamp righted and turned it on, I saw that he was dressed in striped pajamas, complete with a matching nightcap. "Everrose? What on earth?"

Sagging against the door, I laid a hand over my hyperactive heart. "Did you think I was a burglar again?"

Dad grabbed for Ears's collar. "Stop! Stop barking!" As the dog capitulated with a whine, Dad moved his mouth to the side. His voice grew sheepish as he confessed, "Yes."

"I *told* you I'd be coming in late!" I stood up and wiped my hand across my eyes. "Gosh, Dad!"

"I forgot about it when I turned in! What with your mother leaving to catch the red-eye train, and all. I'm sorry, pumpkin." Shuffling forward, he asked, "Hey... what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just want to go to bed, okay? Now that I've aged a year—that's swell, by the way. Thank you for that. I mean it."

Pushing past him and his familiar, I headed down the hallway. As I walked I took big, deep breaths, and fought to get my emotions under control. I would *not* let my family see me cry.

I wouldn't cry at all.

But unfortunately, with that option off the table—all I could do was worry and wait.

3

Maple pursed her lips, and pointed her wand at me. She'd gotten it just a few days ago for gym class—the same simple, machine-hewn willow wand every incoming eighth-grader had on his or her supply list. “You woke me up last night.”

Unflinching, I stared at the Sof-Spell-Kote™ rubber tip. “Sorry.”

My twelve-year-old sister smirked, and let the wand slip casually between her fingers. Maple couldn't *do* anything with it, and she knew it. The rubber tip prevented magical energy from exiting the wand—it was intended only for practice. Witches and warlocks didn't *need* wands; learning how to wield one for formal occasions was purely a matter of etiquette. “If you're going to come home that late, I think you should have to sleep on the lawn.”

I loved my sister, but I wasn't in the mood. “Well, it wouldn't be a problem if I had my own *room*.”

“That is an excellent point. I do believe we should forward it to the board for consideration.” Aiming her wand at the other end of the sunny yellow kitchen, Maple yelled, “Hey, Pops! Taking notes?”

“Hush, you two.” Dad hurried over to where we sat at the green Formica table, frying pan in hand. As glass bottles of milk and orange juice zoomed past his ears, he began to heap scrambled eggs on our plates. He looked ridiculous in our mother's Swedish-patterned apron and oven mitts, especially as he was wearing his usual dress shirt and brown suit slacks beneath. And, for some reason, a tie with atomic boomerangs all over it. “I told you, as soon as your mother gets back we'll start house hunting in earnest.”

Maple glanced at her eggs, then at him. “Are you seriously going into work on a Saturday morning?”

“School rush, sweetheart.” My father owned a printing company that was currently churning out hundreds of books with titles like *Intermediate Spell-Casting: A Problem-Based Approach* and *Homemaking the Magical Way* from its massive presses.

Maple groaned. “Speaking of coming home—how long is Mom going to be gone?”

“As long as Aunt Sally's sick,” I reminded her, pouring myself a glass of milk. Afterward I used my bottle-chilled fingers to cool the corners of my eyes. I hadn't slept a wink.

Wrinkling up her nose, Maple poured *herself* a glass of OJ—but without using her hands. I shook my head, and ignored it. I'd had one too many accidents to risk using magic to serve myself. "Guess it's TV and prison chow for a few days, then."

"Prison chow?" Dad sat down heavily, as if his ego were a physical, supportive thing that had been deflated. Ears came to sit by his chair and monitor his plate, his tail thumping the floor. "I didn't think I was that bad of a cook."

My heart went out to him. He was trying—but it was true. He wasn't Mom. Mom could whip up a sixteen-course meal in midair while simultaneously dusting Dad's record collection and knitting a toilet paper cozy big enough to snuggle over a car.

"Can it," I told Maple, glaring at her. To put a period on it—crossing my fingers under the table as I did so—I directed my other hand Dad's way. In response to my iridescent magic, the coffee percolator stationed in front of his plate floated up and tipped over just *so*. As the hot brown liquid began to pour out, I cringed, hoping it wouldn't spill.

And... it didn't. Miraculously, I managed to fill his cup.

Dad smiled at me. "Thank you, pumpkin."

Flush with success, I beckoned the percolator toward my side of the table, intending to serve myself. But the second it neared my cup the thing rattled, then slowed. Before I could lower it, it crashed down on its side, coffee gushing out.

"And the Red Baron nails another one!" Maple shouted, lifting her plate off the table as I leaned forward to right the percolator and cover the spill with my napkin.

Dad whipped off his oven mitts, and used them to dab at the coffee puddle. As he did, in typical Dad fashion, he tried to help me save face. "So... what time did you get in last night?"

My elation fizzled away. Sitting back, resigned and exhausted, I took the out. "Gee, I don't know. You almost sicced Ears on me. Don't you remember?"

"Did I?" He looked puzzled. "I must not have been fully awake. I *don't* remember."

"When I saw you this morning, I remembered that you woke me *up*. But I must've gone right back to sleep, too." Maple speared a forkful of eggs. "I don't think I looked at the clock."

Thinking back to the time I'd seen on my Moonbeam clock upon entering the room, I shrugged and said, "Midnight?"

Maple whistled suggestively. I glared at her again. Although we shared some of the same traits—most notably our skinniness—she took after Mom. Maple's strawberry blond hair was braided down her back, leaving her elfin features and stormy gray eyes unobstructed. I looked more like Dad, with his age-tarnished golden hair and light blue eyes.

"Maple, don't tease your sister." Dad'd had enough. Still, he gave me a warning look. "Please don't make a habit of staying out that late, though. Eleven at the latest, hmm?"

"Sure thing," I said. "But it was an after-Currens party. They always come through late. The Mayor drove us home."

"Well. I suppose that's fine." Dad frowned. "After all, Mayor Olwen is a... warlock who commands respect."

“Is that why you voted for Kenneth Applewort?” Maple asked, her voice dripping with feigned innocence.

Aaand she was off. Maple was too smart for her own good, sometimes—twelve going on forty, with a mind like a steel trap. Given the amount of drama occupying my thoughts, I wasn’t about to stick around and let her worm her way into them.

Helping myself to a piece of toast, I rose from the table. “May I be excused? I need to call Summerlene and ask her to meet me in town.”

“Of course. I’ll try to be home around four or so... wait.” Dad peered at Maple. “You can’t stay here alone.” The way he said it sounded like he’d *just* remembered an obscure bit of advice doodled in the margin of a technical manual.

Maple, who for half a second had glowed with the thrill of being left to her own devices, hunched her shoulders up and pouted. “I’m almost thirteen, Dad! I don’t need a babysitter!”

I wasn’t keen on the idea of *being* her babysitter. “Dad, she’s not going to set the house on fire.”

“No. No one is going to be left alone. If your mother ever got wind of it, *I’d* be the one sleeping on the lawn.” He looked at me over his coffee mug. “Summerlene is more than welcome to come over and spend the day with you, though.”

Maple grumbled, and stabbed at her eggs in annoyance. Sighing, I nodded. I’d take what I could get.

When I called Summerlene from the pink Princess phone in my room, I caught her on the first ring. “The future Mrs. Roddy Olwen speaking.”

“Summerlene!”

“Everrose!” She squealed. “I was out walking this morning, and I saw them. The new election posters are going up! I stole one off the side of the drugstore before the paste could dry!”

Burying my face in my hand, I whispered, “Why would you do something like that?”

“Because he’s the ginchiest warlock this side of the Ward. Why else?”

“He’s thirty... nine? Forty?” As I keyed in on a song playing in the background, I blinked. “Are you *actually* listening to ‘Born Too Late’ while you make eyes at his election ad?”

“I can’t control which part of my Poni Tails record is playing at any particular point in time.”

“Look...”

“No, it’s fine. I’m sent, but copacetic. Listen, now that you’ve reminded me—I was mulling over your problem in the car last night.”

Frowning, I said, “Which one? I’ve got enough to write a country song.”

“I figure first things first. Let’s go get your familiar.”

~

A couple hours later, Summerlene and I were pushing our bikes along a dirt road high up on the western ridge of Stoneset Hollow. I wasn’t aware of our exact location, but I knew that where we stood was north of our shared neighborhood of Witchvale, with Stoneset proper in the valley behind us. The town of

Stoneset was the de facto capital of All Hollows, located in the southeastern quadrant along the Cherryweed River.

From our position, we could look down through the autumn-rusted forest toward Fourstones Field. Below that, of course, was Snow Hollow. The entirety of All Hollows County rippled and wrinkled like a sickbed quilt, up and down, town-to-town and wood-to-wood.

Ahead of us ran Maple, dressed in rolled-up jeans and a gingham blouse, a long stick in one hand and a basket in the other. I'd told Dad we were taking her nutting.

In reality, we were waiting to see if a wild animal would volunteer its magic-sensing services.

"There's a crow up there." Summerlene drew her bike to a stop and pointed toward a nearby ash tree, her obit bracelet tinkling.

I looked. The bird sat on a high branch, black and glossy. I stopped moving, and waited to see if it would approach.

It didn't. After a moment, it flew away.

Frustrated, I said, "Maybe walking around out here is pointless."

"What else do you suggest we do?" Summerlene was in business mode. She pushed on, her white sundress swishing about her legs. I followed. "You've been to the pet store, right?"

"Of course. We went with the gang a week after school let out. You were there. Linden Muss found a cockatiel and joked about how he could finally start cursing all the people who'd ever picked on him. Specifically the ones with cars."

"Oh, right." Looking about, Summerlene made a noise of discontent. Business mode or not, when it came down to it, she was as helpless as I was. A familiar couldn't be chosen—only *found*. The Connexion was irresistible, but unpredictable. All I could do to speed up the process was try to expose myself to as many animals as possible.

I was resolved not to panic. I *knew* I was going to find my familiar eventually. After that, years might pass before I found another—if I ever found another. But *everyone* got a familiar at sixteen.

Still... panic tickled at the back of my mind. Not all of it related to the task at hand.

"Maybe we should go back." I brushed a stray leaf off my own pink sundress. I'd finished sewing it just the other day. We were both wearing ribbon-bound ponytails; mine swayed against my shoulders as I straightened up. "Maybe your father would be willing to take me out driving, like he did for you."

"I wish he hadn't." Summerlene pulled a face at Daisy, who was riding in her bike basket. "I've been thinking. Some witches take more than one familiar... powerful crones, you know? Which means they felt the Connexion with more than one animal. Maybe there's something better waiting for me out there. Something that would've found me if *I* hadn't found Daisy, first."

Poor Daisy. "The Connexion—what's it like? What am I supposed to be feeling?"

Summerlene considered my question. After a moment, she pronounced, "This is going to sound kooky, but hear me out. My parents have a framed jigsaw puzzle in their bedroom. Big thing, in a big gold frame. The picture's of a castle. I used to stare at it when I was little and sick, and Mom would bundle me up in their bed. She'd tell me stories about it, like it was a real castle where people lived."

I knew the picture she was talking about. Curious, I listened.

“That puzzle’s always been a part of my life. I can’t remember a time when it wasn’t. Well, I’d never seen Daisy before, but when I saw her in the cage... I couldn’t imagine a time when I didn’t know every detail about her, too. It was like I’d grown up around her.”

Given how put out Summerlene was, I wasn’t expecting such an eloquent response. “What happened when she saw *you*?”

“Well, she flipped out, like I told you. And then, when I looked in her eyes, I just... felt it.” She stopped, and I brought my own bike to a halt beside hers. “I think I know why they spell Connexion the old way, with the X, now. Something clicked, and now... it’s hard to describe. I just know that she’s... there. Part of me. Working for me. Like my arm. Even when it’s not moving, even when it’s just sitting at my side, my arm’s always there.”

“But you don’t feel anything else? Or... know what she’s thinking?”

“No. There’s no telepathy going on. No feelings being exchanged. She’s just an animal.” Summerlene looked at me. “But when Julie Bentwood started building up that hex last night, Daisy obviously felt it. Like a horse senses a storm. I almost wish I’d started to wind one up to send back at her. I think I know how to do it. I wonder how Daisy would’ve reacted.”

A motion in the undergrowth caught my attention. A squirrel. Frozen between anticipation and active dread (was a squirrel better or worse than a guinea pig?) I watched as it scampered away. “At least if someone tries to hex you, you can *retaliate*. I’m starting to feel like I have no control over *anything* in my life.”

“Everrose, have some pride. I don’t see you with a squirrel. I wouldn’t obses—”

“It’s not the squirrel!” I gave into the stress. “At least you found Daisy. I can’t find *my* familiar at all! And worse...”

Summerlene’s expression sobered. “Vince?”

I went quiet, almost ashamed to admit it. Summerlene looked at me in expectation. Lowering my voice, I said, “Yeah.”

Once his name was spoken, it was easy to switch conversational gears. “I didn’t want to bring it up if you didn’t want to talk about it. But what was *with* him? I’ve never seen him act like that. Normally he’s the coolest boy in the gang.”

“I know. I’m worried about him.” I had to confess, “I’m *scared*. What if he doesn’t want to go steady anymore?”

“That can’t be it.” Summerlene clucked her tongue. “You two are meant to be. Like some kind of silver screen romance.”

Well. That was a bit dramatic. “He could’ve found a Layside girl, though.”

Summerlene carried on as if I hadn’t spoken. “You, the shy witch everybody likes but nobody really knows, snagging the dreamiest warlock in school? It’s much too much. I refuse to let you two break up. It would crush my soul.”

Something about the way she phrased it irked me, but I had to admit she was right. I was a nobody; Vincent was the absolute most. The fact that he’d *ever* asked me out was amazing, but the way he’d treated me since claiming me as his steady? With such attention, such affection? It beggared belief.

Well, until last night. When he’d looked at me like I was a stranger.

That's what frightened me most. When we'd started going out, things had been casual. Since March, though... my life had been a dream. No one had ever paid me so much attention. Vincent listened to me. He remembered to include me. He arranged our dates. He sent me love letters. He even *called* me.

I couldn't bear to lose that. It made me feel wanted. *Human*.

"I guess I'm less convinced than you," I said, still glum.

"Everrose." Summerlene gave me a long-suffering look. "He was *prophesied* for you. Some of us should be so lucky."

That thought actually brought me some comfort. My maternal aunt, Mrs. Sally Dwyett, was a skilled clairvoyant. According to family legend, when I was born Aunt Sally declared, "This girl will be loved by a man with eyes like her own. Eyes like a blue winter sky."

The first time I ever saw Vincent—when my kindergarten class passed by the open door of his second-grade classroom back at Bogsink Elementary—I knew he was the one.

But if Summerlene was right, that left only one awful possibility. "Then something's *wrong* with him. And I don't know how to find out *what*, or how to help him."

"Hey!"

We looked ahead. Maple stood a few yards away, her tree-whacking stick pointed down a dirt lane. "I think there're some walnuts down there!"

Summerlene touched my arm and flashed an encouraging smile, before donning her best Older Girl Laying Down the Law expression. "I think that's someone's driveway, Maple. We're only allowed to harvest nuts within ten feet of the main road."

"Paragraph and section me, why don't you?" Maple called back. "I'm sure Olwen the Elder'll be real impressed by your knowledge of nut bylaw, one day."

"Listen here, you little nosebleed..."

"Guys." Summerlene relented, muttering to herself as I spoke. "She's right, Maple. We should head back before we get tired, anyway."

"But I haven't seen any other walnuts this entire time!"

"That doesn't matter. Let's go."

Summerlene and I began to push our bikes again. Maple held her position, squinting as the wind picked up around us. The autumn leaves shivered. Gray clouds rolled in front of the sun, stealing the light from the sky.

"Seriously, no one's going to know if we pop down there and help ourselves to a few walnuts," Maple argued.

I groaned. Why wouldn't she let this go? "Of course they will. It's either mansions or hunting shacks out here. And the warlocks who live in both places tend to be ward-happy."

"You don't know that!"

"Maple, we're going back to town! I want to stop by the Brew-Lo and pick up some things for dinner. Have it on the table for Dad when he gets back."

"Well aren't you just *Kathy the Kitchen Witch*?" Maple rolled her eyes and started humming the series theme song off-key.

"You were complaining about Dad's cooking earlier!"

“Yeah, but at least he can use magic *to* cook.” Maple met my eyes, a challenge in hers. “What can *you* do? Make Laysider Casserole? You could barely lift the percolator this morning.”

“Hey,” Summerlene said. “That’s crossing the line.”

It was. My cheeks began to flush with anger. I wasn’t sure why the last twenty-four hours had been so dreadful—maybe someone had leveled a curse my way.

And me without a familiar who could tell me so.

A couple years ago, I might’ve blown up at Maple. But I was older, now. Headed into senior high school. More responsible. At least, that’s what I told myself to keep from saying something I’d regret.

“We’re going home,” I said. “Hop on the back of my bike.”

Maple glowered at me for a moment longer. Then, she said it. “*I* don’t feel any wards. You might be older than me, but I’m a better witch than you are. I’m tired of being told what to do, where to go. You’re so helpless, I should be minding *you*.”

“*Oh*.” Summerlene marched forward. “You little sub-teen monster...”

Paralyzed with outrage, I watched as Maple turned and ran away from Summerlene, down the long tree-shadowed drive. A second later, my outrage chilled to fear—for the drive ran eastward, and thus downhill, sloping back into the hollow. The ground seemed to swallow Maple from foot to head. The way was steep, and she was going fast.

Summerlene and I shared a panicked look, before hopping on our bikes and giving chase. “Maple!” I yelled. “Come back! That’s someone’s property!”

I heard her scream before I saw her. My legs pumped almost without my willing them to, and soon she was within my sight—on the ground, her legs curled beneath her. Ahead of me, Summerlene turned her bike at an angle, skidding to a stop.

But I didn’t stop. I couldn’t.

The drive made a sudden, strange hairpin turn. Summerlene and Maple were left on the curve; I went sailing past it. My stomach dropped as the ground gave way beneath me—and as I fell. My tires hit the forest floor and wobbled through a quagmire of leaves, then dropped again as I catapulted over a ridge.

I let go of the handlebars, and my bike went on without me. I arced through the air for what felt like forever before gravity insisted on its due. Submitting stupidly to the instructions being spit out by my reptile brain, I spiraled my arms in the air, seeking to break my fall, to find some sort of purchase. At the last minute I tried to build a floating spell, to catch myself in midair.

It didn’t work.

I landed on my wrist, and beneath the carpet of rotting leaves and moss I could feel unforgiving rock.

My wrist crunched.

I screamed.

“Everrose!” It was Summerlene, far off—somewhere above me. Struggling to open my eyes, at first I saw nothing but white.

As the forest materialized around me, though....

As the forest....

My heart, already racing, began to squeeze so tightly against itself that I could feel each fleshy movement, each inch of pressure exerted by my screaming blood.

Ahead of me, a collection of gray, rain-pitted boulders jutted from the mossy forest floor. Except that one of them had eyes—eyes of glowing, hypnotic blue.

As I watched, the boulder stood up on two massive legs, revealing itself to be anything but. It was a beast, easily ten feet tall, and built like something out of... no. This thing was not *from* someone's nightmares; it was the architect and ruler of the realm from which nightmares must originate, the King of All Night Terrors. Feline in name only, it had shoulders that looked like they were capable of bearing up an entire train, arms like tree trunks, and clawed, humanoid hands that seemed designed for crushing granite.

Behind its back, its long tail shivered upward. Like a scorpion's. The tip was paddle-shaped and covered with dozens of vicious, bony spines—spines that rattled together, portending my death.

Before I could take another breath, the beast was upon me. It landed atop me gracefully, its limbs tensed, not a single hair on its body brushing mine. Rumbling low, the beast lowered its face over mine, and in that second—absolutely sure I was about to die—my vision sharpened to the point where I found myself fascinated by the smoky brown speckles gathered underneath its ferocious eyes. Its pelt was brown and white and silvery gray, striped and spotted. Its ears were slicked back in anger. Long canines overhung its lower jaw.

A jaw that was... bound. Unable to open.

The beast was muzzled. A black leather band—like a belt—was wrapped about its long snout and secured with a golden lock. The lock bore runes and other magical symbols. I couldn't make them out.

Hyperventilating, I looked into the creature's electric eyes, only to find that they were already focused on mine. Shock jolted me back to awareness as I realized that the beast wasn't looking at me like a predator might a prey animal. Instead, the beast seemed to be searching me out—wordlessly interrogating me. I couldn't name the thing that made me jump to this conclusion, but whatever it was, it turned my spine into water and my imagination into a minefield.

The blue glow within the beast's eyes sputtered and died, revealing irises the color of honeyed pecans. For a long second, the creature continued to study me. I felt vulnerable. Exposed. Caught on a wire between life and death. But then, it moved. The beast's broad shoulders rippled as it leapt forward. I turned on the ground, watching as it bounded away from me, up toward the ridge.

I wanted to scream. To warn Summerlene and Maple that it was coming.

But I didn't have the breath.

And I didn't have to.

A scant few yards from where I'd landed, the beast crumpled to the ground in mid-stride, surrounded by a glittering, translucent net of red light. It uttered a fierce, but somewhat muffled snarl—the muzzle prevented it from crying out. Only after the animal hit the ground did I hear the net whistling through the air and whipping shut around its prey.

"Damn thing! Where'd you think you could go, eh?" a deep voice asked. Footsteps neared the place where I lay, and soon I saw their producer—a tall black warlock with close-cropped hair and a moustache, about Mayor Olwen's age, dressed in canvas pants and a red plaid hunting jacket.

I knew him. By the Founders....

Crouching down, the warlock wrapped his arm around my shoulders and urged me upward. After a few deep, measured breaths, I took the hint and sat up. He didn't let me stop there, but pulled me to my feet. I gave it my best shot, though it was a risky proposition. My legs wanted to give out.

"Are you all right?" the warlock barked.

Swallowing, I shut my eyes. "Wrist," I got out.

"Which one?"

"Right."

Without my having to think about it, he brought my right arm forward, only touching me between the shoulder and the elbow. My left got the same attention, and when it was judged to be sound he tucked my left hand beneath my right forearm. After assuring himself that I would support my own arm, he took me by the shoulders. "Breathe."

I did. Soon, I was calm enough to open my eyes. The warlock was looking at me intently, sweat beading on his brow. "Permission to heal it?"

I nodded. With a grunt, he gingerly surrounded my wrist with his fingers—causing me to bite my lip to keep from yelling half a dozen obscenities—and began to concentrate. Red energy leaked from his skin and crystallized upon my own, bringing with it a soothing heat—and a crackling, terrible pain as my bones were realigned and knitted together.

Yet, two minutes later I had my wrist back. I tried it out after he let go of me, and relaxed somewhat when it worked. "T-Thank you, Mr. Silversharp."

Lanre Silversharp was the Historian of All Hollows—a privileged, elite position that nonetheless included delivering lectures to children at county schools. I recognized him from a talk he gave last spring. "Oh, are we on a name basis? Because I don't recall giving you permission to visit my estate. In fact, I don't know who the *hell* you are."

Ignoring his language, I said, "I'm sorry. You came to my school. My name is Everrose Morgantwill."

That seemed to satisfy him, at least partially. "What are you doing here? This is private property!"

That was his concern? I looked beyond him, only to see the creature thrashing against its bonds. "I... my sister ran onto your land. I chased after her, and had an accident. I'm very sorry."

His eyes narrowed. "Where's your sister?"

"She and Summerlene Hayes are up on the drive."

"Everrose!"

No, they weren't. Turning, I watched as Summerlene and Maple—who was, to my profound relief, apparently fine—slid down the ridge, catching hold of whatever plants or rocks came into their reach. When they found solid footing, they realized that I wasn't alone. Summerlene's eyes widened.

Then they glanced *past* Mr. Silversharp.

Maple gasped, and darted behind Summerlene. Summerlene straightened, and tightened her hold on Daisy. "What... what's going on?"

"Okay, you three need to get packing." Mr. Silversharp pointed over Summerlene's shoulder. "Right behind you, there's a path back up. I want you gone, *now*."

"What kind of wildeor *is* that?" Summerlene demanded.

I didn't know. I didn't care. I was ready to obey Mr. Silversharp, and so I stumbled toward the other girls. When I got within reach, Maple wrapped her arms about my waist. I forgave her, and hugged her right back.

Mr. Silversharp glared at Summerlene. "A *dangerous* one." But even as he settled his shoulders back, adopting a posture that said he'd brook no disobedience—a proud smile ghosted his lips. "My latest trophy."

"Trophy?" Summerlene backed up a step. "You *hunted* that thing?"

"Hmm. Hobby of mine... except when it becomes a service." Arrogance lent an unpleasant sharpness to his rich baritone. "That thing was terrorizing Mire Hollow. Took nearly everything I had to snare it alive, I'll tell you that."

Summerlene stared. "Wildeor" was what our people called supernatural creatures—like dragons and unicorns. Animals steeped in myth and magic, but animals nonetheless. There were hundreds of different wildeors in All Hollows, descended from specimens imported prior to the closing of the Ward or summoned thereafter. "And you brought it back *here*? Near *Stoneset*?"

"I'll bring it anywhere I like, missy," said Mr. Silversharp. "I've half a mind to exhibit it at the Harvest Festival, with the rest of this year's collection."

"Are you going to kill it?" I asked, my voice but a breath.

"*Kill* it? Are you mad?" I might've insulted his mother. "It's a trothenbeast. It's as rare as my father's hair! I'd be a fool not to keep it alive!"

I didn't know what a trothenbeast was. From looking at Summerlene, I could tell that she didn't, either. "But..." I realized what had happened even as I said the words. "You brought it here, and it got away from you."

Mr. Silversharp's eyes sparked. "Okay, time for you girls to go home."

"It got away!" My usually soft voice hardened; my throat clenched. I was tired of being ignored, tired of being forgotten, tired of being sidelined and insulted and of swallowing my words when it happened, of just accepting things. Tired of being *helpless*. "Mr. Silversharp, that thing almost *killed* me!"

"Watch your tone, young lady. Do I need to call your parents?"

I snapped. "Do it! Do it, and let them come here! Let them see the beast you're going to try and keep in a cage as a *pet*! Instead of turning it into... into a mounted head, or a rug, or whatever it is you do with the monsters you like to run around All Hollows trapping and slaughtering. Does that make you feel like a man? Huh? Chasing down things that're bigger than you? Maybe you should make sure you can control them before you catch them!"

Summerlene took my arm. Maple whistled. Mr. Silversharp's nostrils flared, and he moved forward. "Why, you insolent little hag! Don't you know who I am?"

I did—and I didn't care. But although for once I was ready to stand my ground, Summerlene and Maple started pulling. "Come on, Everrose!" my sister begged. "Please, let's just leave!"

For just a second longer, I hung in. Long enough to take a final look at the beast. It had tortured itself within the magical netting, upending its body and tangling its limbs. Its head was pointed in our direction, and as I stood there I could have sworn its eyes met mine.

Consciously. Deliberately.

My heart panged. I couldn't explain why, but... its eyes were so intelligent. So full of...

Fury. Pain. *Fear*.

It was more than I expected to see. More than I wanted.

A moment later, I turned and fled with the others. Breathless and aching, we clambered our way up to the drive. Once there, I kept going, determined to leave the Silversharp estate bathed in dust.

"Your bike!" Summerlene gasped, as she dove forward and grabbed her own. Daisy jumped from her arms into the basket. Maple ran right past her own basket, abandoning her harvest.

"Forget about it!" I yelled back.

As if on cue, I heard the sound of branches cracking. Before I could even turn to look, my bike flew out of the forest and landed on the driveway so hard it scarcely bounced, right in front of me. My loafers skittered across the dirt and my body twisted as I fought to come to a stop before I slammed into it. The bike was muddy and snarled with weeds, but bore only superficial dents and scrapes.

For a split second, I stared at it. I knew my bike hadn't been returned to me. It'd been *hurled* at me.

It was a message.

So, with Maple clinging to my shoulders, I pedaled it back to town—so hard and so fast that I felt like my chest would explode.

At the Brew-Lo, I called my father from a pay phone.

4

“I’m sorry,” Maple whispered in the near darkness of our shared bedroom for the fiftieth time. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I told her, when it really wasn’t. “Seriously, just go to sleep.”

Although there were only two bedrooms in the house, our parents had at least given my sister and I the biggest to split. Our twin beds sat on either side of the innermost wall, separated by our nightstands and a rag rug. The walls were pink, and festooned with pictures of movie stars and Stoneset Hollow school pennants. Our large window looked out on the front yard.

The best part was the tower, though. The eastern corner of our house featured a faux, crooked tower, but the lower round portion was habitable. Maple and I used that space to work. The left side, hers, was cluttered with art supplies. My side held a dress form, my sewing machine, and trunks full of tools and trim.

Falling silent, Maple turned toward the wall and drew the blankets around her shoulders. And I continued to stare into the room, unseeing, with only the light of my Moonbeam clock to keep me company.

When Dad had picked us up in his beige Buick Century, there’d been a lot of yelling. At us, at an invisible Mr. Silversharp, at the other drivers on the road. After dropping Summerlene off at her house Dad had threatened to go to the Wardens, to not let us see daylight again until we were thirty—and worst of all, to call Mom.

Yet, in the end, nothing had come of it. It’d all been an accident—on Mr. Silversharp’s land, where we weren’t even supposed to be. I’d not been hurt by the beast, and what injuries I’d sustained had been healed. By the Founders, he’d even returned my bike. So what could we accuse Mr. Silversharp of, exactly? Scaring trespassers away?

Even Dad had noted, during an otherwise silent dinner, “I should make you go over there and apologize to him. But I’m not about to.”

It was humiliating. Maple’s words still stung, the hairs on my arms still wanted to stand on end, and I was tired and anxious and *angry*.

Once Maple was quiet, I let those emotions drive me from my bed. Picking up my pink phone, I carried it to the tower side of the room, as far away from my sister as the wall cord would allow. Then, after placing the phone in my lap, I dialed Vincent's number.

A disconcerting number of rings followed. When I finally heard the telltale click I held my breath, waiting to see if it was Vincent or his father who had picked up the phone.

Alas—it was neither. The voice on the other end of the line belonged to their housekeeper, a portly, affable old witch named Martha Monk. “Olwen residence.”

I swallowed my disappointment, and tried my best to sound polite. “This is Everrose Morgantwill. I know it's late, but I was hoping to speak to Vincent.”

“I'm sorry—who is this, again?”

Rolling my eyes, I reminded her who I was.

“Oh, Vincent's young lady friend! Well, I regret to have to tell you that Vincent isn't in, dear.” Her voice was unusually emotionless. “Neither is the Mayor, for that matter.”

“Oh,” I answered. “Um... will they be back soon?”

“I don't know, dear. I...” She sighed. “Things haven't gone well today. I probably shouldn't say more than that. I know you're a special case, but... old habits die hard. You understand? Discretion.”

“Oh... of course, Mrs. Monk. Good night.”

I hung up, my heart in my throat. The time for guessing was over. It was *obvious* that something had happened to Vincent while he was out on Currens. The way he'd acted at the party, the lack of communication, the fact that he and his father were (I supposed) off somewhere butting heads—none of it added up. All of it unnerved me.

I didn't like being left in the dark. Treated—even unwittingly—like the child I felt myself to be. Children were protected from news that would upset them. Not girlfriends.

Not equals.

As I shut my eyes, I resolved that tomorrow everything would be settled. Fixed. Come hell or high water, I would talk to Vincent. Potentially while scoping out every barn between Stoneset and Westwait Hollow.

And, on that note... I would also indulge my curiosity.

~

The next day was Sunday—the day my family traditionally slept late. Before I fell asleep, I set the Moonbeam to wake me up at nine o'clock by flashing a light instead of ringing. Thus I was able to get up before Maple, throw on a skirt and a sweater, and sneak out to the garage for my bike. By half past nine I was at the Brew-Lo grocery store, buying a hot sugared donut and a glass bottle of apple cider with a paper straw. By ten I was in the Gregory Greensmith Memorial Library, returning the copy of *Cherry Ames: Boarding School Nurse* I'd borrowed and asking where I might find a book on rare wildeors.

“The card catalog,” the gray-haired librarian, Mrs. Finks, reminded me crisply.

I sighed, and submitted with a nod. The card catalog was housed in a long, ornate cabinet that took up most of the old Victorian building's northern wall. I approached it with trepidation in my heart—and another T-word in my mind.

Trothenbeast.

The tiny drawer labeled *TR* was located on the far right side of the cabinet. Pulling it open, I flicked through the cards inside until I thought I'd found a good reference. Chanting the book's inventory number to myself, I hurried through the vaulted main library chamber and back into the dusty stacks, where the reference books were kept.

There, on a high shelf, I found the book I wanted—*Tales of the Founders: First-Hand Accounts of the Early Years of All Hollows*. After easing it down with two hands I sat on the floor criss-cross style, my bobby sox brushing my knees, and cracked it open to the first page.

It is a fact acknowledged even by Layside historians that, beginning in the fifteenth century, a vicious anti-witchcraft hysteria infected Europe, resulting in tens of thousands of brutal persecutions. Many of these concluded in the torture and, almost inevitably, murder of innocent witches and warlocks.

Even though men and women with magical abilities had formed part of human society since its inception—variously called shamans and oracles, native healers and cunning folk—in the face of increasing religious fervor these unfortunate souls were branded as outcasts. Caught in the unrelenting grip of a new theology, one that reduced the world to simplistic shades of black and white, those touched by magic came to be regarded as subhuman puppets controlled by malevolent powers for the sole purpose of attacking the “good” and faithful people of the world.

Faced with certain doom, witches and warlocks across Europe did their utmost to integrate themselves into “normal” society. Restraining their talents, too terrified to even fraternize with one another, they lived stifled, anxious lives. Together, they looked forward to the day when the hysteria would pass—when their gifts would no longer be considered foul and demonic.

As they masqueraded in non-magical society, witches and warlocks of all stripes were understandably influenced by contemporary social and historical events. Just as interested in the pursuit of freedom and fortune as their non-magical counterparts, a large number of magical folk began to look with interest upon the New World, and upon the burgeoning American colonies in particular. It is not an exaggeration to state that a witch was present aboard nearly every ship dispatched to the colonies at the height of their early settlement. Neither is it a mischaracterization to state that many—in fact, most—of these intrepid immigrants were seeking their own particular brand of freedom.

Alas, they did not find it. The burnings and hangings followed them to the New World, with the first mass witch hunt taking place in 1662 in Hartford, Connecticut. And thus, a new plan was born.

Word of this plan spread quickly—on the wings of magic. It was audacious. It was dangerous. Such a thing had never been attempted even in the Old World, where for centuries, magic had been respected and venerated.

It was no less than the creation of a New New World... a world within a world.

From 1665 to 1669, thousands of newly minted American witches and warlocks fled into hiding, channeled by friendly households toward the interior of the new country. Their ultimate goal was the deep, primeval forests of what would one day be known as Pennsylvania.

The Magical Exodus was overseen and served by many brave leaders, but especially by nine witches and warlocks of great distinction—the Great Founders of All Hollows. One of them, a French witch named Marie-Hélène de Naissance, was ultimately responsible for casting the rare, powerful Nestle Ward that protects All Hollows in 1670—but surprisingly, much about her life has been lost to history.

This work is an attempt to prevent the same fate from befalling the other eight....

My interest began to wane, and I skipped to the index. After tracing the word *trothenbeast* with my finger, I turned to the place in the book where it was mentioned.

Descended from the same monstrous line that begat the Beast of Gévaudan, which terrorized the French countryside in the 1760s, trothenbeasts were originally bred by ancient warlocks for hunting and guarding treasure. They are so named because, in spite of their ferocious appearance, they are capable of learning to mimic human speech. Comparable in intelligence to the average parrot, tame trothenbeasts were occasionally used for comic relief in magical plays written during the Middle Ages. It is thought that these performances, interpreted from a non-magical perspective, inspired the legend that eventually evolved into Beauty and the Beast.

These enormous, semi-anthropomorphic scimitar cats were fond favorites of Great Founder Morris Braintree. As they are capable of walking on two legs, but more comfortable on four, Founder Braintree was known for training them to pull his coach.

“Everrose?”

Looking up, I felt my heart flip-flop. “Vincent!”

He stood just ahead of me, deeper within the stacks. Leatherhyde was asleep on his shoulder. His shirtsleeves were rolled up, and in his arms he carried several books. I couldn’t make out the titles on most of them, but one was new, the golden letters on its spine still bright. *Layside Electrics: Adoption Bureau Standards and Statistics, 1957.*

For a second, I feared he might turn tail and run again. His blue eyes were wide, his posture spooked. When he noticed that I was scrutinizing his books, he shifted them in his arms, hiding their titles. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing!” My surprise took a temporary backseat, and I felt my eyes narrow. “I tried to call you last night. I was planning to ride to your house after finishing up here.”

“Oh. I didn’t know. Mrs. Monk didn’t tell me anyone called.”

“And you had no plans to call me, yourself?”

“Sorry. I’ve... been busy.”

“Busy?” I took pains to lower my voice. “You’ve only been back for a *day!*”

“Look...” Vincent came closer and knelt down, setting his books on one of the shelves above my head. I noticed that he still had bags underneath his eyes. “I’m so sorry. For everything. The party, treating you

the way I did—you didn't deserve that. And like I said, it has nothing to do with you. Well... in a way, it has *everything* to do with you. But not in the way you'd think?"

Though his speech included everything I'd gone into the day looking for—an apology, acknowledgment that it wasn't *me*, Vincent's best contrite purr—it left me feeling hollow. I wasn't sure why. "What do you mean? That's the thing, Vincent. You keep apologizing, but you haven't told me what's making you *do* things that you have to apologize *for*. I feel like we're talking in circles."

For a moment, Vincent was silent. When he spoke again, it was with a deeper, more serious tone of voice. "You're right. I owe you an explanation. I'm just not sure how t—"

Out of nowhere, a horrible chattering sound shattered the relative silence of the library. Glancing up, I saw that a blue jay had alighted upon the wooden shelves. Mrs. Fink's familiar.

"No talking!" It was Mrs. Fink's hushing, angry voice—all around us, immediate. Yet, she was nowhere to be seen. A magical projection.

Offering his hand, Vincent whispered, "Outside?"

I took it. I held onto it tightly, even as Vincent took the time to check out several of his books.

The library was located on Main Street, which by eleven o'clock was bustling. As I turned my head, I could see that the Brew-Lo now had no less than ten baby carriages parked outside, the infants within them left to enjoy the sun while their mothers shopped. Two babies appeared to be engaged in a feud, popping pink and blue sparks at one another. Meanwhile, young people hustled in and out of the Morpheum Theater next door, likely for the Sunday Quadruple Feature. For fifty-five cents, you could unload your child on the Morpheum for a full eight hours.

With October just around the corner, an employee had been tasked with mounting the posters for several upcoming monster movies. His toolbox propped the theater door open, allowing Neil Sedaka's "The Diary" to blast from the lobby inside. *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, I saw, would be showing next week.

As I glanced at the poster, my heart twinged. I couldn't tolerate that film. The one time I'd seen it, everyone around me had screamed or laughed at the monster on the screen. But I'd just felt pity. It was the silliest of silly horror movies, and I'd walked out of it in tears.

"The park?" Vincent asked, calling me back to reality. "I'm afraid if we go to the drugstore, the gang will be there."

"Sounds swell," I told him. Still hand in hand, we headed for the street.

The park across the way was small, but picturesque. A wrought iron gate announced that it was the Great Founder Arielle Kellyer Park, and matching iron benches were dotted throughout. The grass was still green, though the flowerbeds within were mostly empty. Only a few mums remained.

We sat down on a sun-warmed bench. There, Vincent took my hand and placed it on his unoccupied shoulder. It was a purposeful action, and I got the intended message. I was allowed to touch him. I was thankful for the reassurance.

"So," he said, his beautiful voice drawing out the word. "Currens."

Without interrupting him, I removed my hand and used it to unbutton the little pocket stitched to the front of his green sweater vest. Leatherhyde crawled inside, huddling away from the sunlight.

“Currens is supposed to be a ball. The most fun you’ll ever have. From the time you’re a little kid you’re told that outside the Ward, life’s an adventure. That you and your friends will do things you’ll all laugh about when you’re old and gray.” Vincent grabbed my hand again, once it was no longer occupied with Leatherhyde. “But for me... it wasn’t like that.”

“What *was* it like?”

Vincent thought about it for a second, his expression troubled. “You know that one of the effects of the Nestle Ward is that time passes more slowly inside of it. We’re almost sixty years behind the Layside.”

“Of course.”

“Have you gotten to the point in history class, yet, where you learn more about the Break?”

I tried to recall. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Well, you know what the Break is.”

“Yes. It was when the time difference began to get too great.” I knew that for every ten years that passed on the Layside, only eight and a half passed within the Ward. “When the Nestle Ward was first cast, it was 1670 on both sides. But as the years wore on, the time difference started to add up. First both sides were one and a half years apart, then three, then six... now we’re nearly sixty.”

“Right. The Break happened during the 1880s in All Hollows. On the Layside, it was the 1920s. Those two eras were *very* different. The social scene, the fashions, the technology. So that was the point when our leaders decided to control for the time difference. They wanted to make sure our society stayed on an even keel. That we didn’t have to experience the old constantly battling against the new. The Adoption Bureau was started, to control which Layside advancements were allowed inside All Hollows.”

This was all grade-school stuff. I wasn’t sure why we were talking about it. “Yes. So?”

Vincent looked pained. “Everrose, the Laysiders are so far ahead of us—it’s *terrifying*.”

Staring at him, I said, “Of course they are. It’s 2015 out there. They must have... flying cars, and colonies on Mars, and robotic chefs that do their cooking for them. Life must be like an Atom Age comic.”

“No! It’s *not* like that!” Vincent shot to his feet. Before I could do anything to stop him, he started to pace. “It’s more serious than that. They live in a world that seems to have no end. A world that never stops to take a breath. A world where a single person can speak and everyone *else* can hear what they say the moment they say it, where mobs can rise up against dictators at the click of a button, a world that’s so *loud*...” He came to a standstill, looking off into the distance. “That’s what got to me, first. How *loud* everything is there. There are millions of cars and millions of lights and *billions* of people... and nothing ever stops. Cities never *sleep*. There are screens everywhere, screens that never stop broadcasting *something*...”

I said nothing. I couldn’t.

After a few seconds, Vincent returned to my side. “At first, I just wanted to go home. It was like something out of a paperback novel, or a science fiction show. It was too much.”

“What made you stay, then?”

“I started *listening* to the noise.” Vincent steepled his fingers between his knees. “And what I heard challenged everything I’d ever been taught.”

“Challenged?” My lips were dry. I realized that my mouth was hanging open, and took pains to close it. “How?”

“The Laysiders—we always tend to think of them as backward. They hounded our ancestors, hunted them down and killed them for no good reason, and so we imagine them as ignorant peasants, complete with torches, but... they’re *not*. The Laysiders are *better* than us, Everrose. In every way.”

This time, *I* stood up. “How can you say that? They attempted to *wipe out* our people!” The book I’d read in the library was still fresh in my mind, fuel for my outrage.

Vincent put up his hands and begged, “Please, hear me out.”

“I *want* to, but Vincent...” What he was saying sounded nearly treasonous. I almost *wished* he’d found a Layside girl he liked better. That would have been easier to deal with.

“Do you think I set out on Currens *wanting* to see the things I saw?” He pointed at his chest. “Do you think I wanted to end up feeling this way?”

No. I couldn’t imagine anyone wanting that. Fighting to keep my voice under control, I said, “Then *tell me*. Tell me what you saw!”

Vincent waited until I sat down next to him again. Then, casting his eyes about the park and lowering his voice, he said, “They fly through the skies faster than anyone on a broomstick ever could, in their great airplanes—hundreds of people to a plane. They can talk to folks who are thousands of miles away, using wireless energy that travels through the air faster than a spell could ever zip. Sometimes they talk face-to-face, on book-like devices that function far better than even our crystal balls. Laysiders can conjure items on machines, simply by punching a button—the machine can build any item they want, as long as they have the right instructions. And they can cure diseases that are still hopeless on this side of the Ward, using machines that allow them to look right into the human body, like living X-rays.”

“Gee,” was all I could think to say. “But then, of course they’d come up with these marvelous things. They don’t have magic.”

“That’s just it! Laysiders live in a world where magic isn’t necessary. A world where magic would be a *backward* way to accomplish anything.”

Understanding finally came to me. “Are you saying... that you think magic’s old hat? Obsolete?”

“Yes!” Distressed, Vincent placed his knees on his thighs and leaned forward. “Everrose, we went into hiding, and we took our magic with us. We left the Laysiders with *nothing*. But now, they have *everything*. They’ve left us in the dust.”

My face heated. “Just because they can do some things we can’t do yet, or do them differently, doesn’t mean our powers are useless.”

“But they *are*!” Vincent layered his hands together, forming a double fist. “Because what have we used our magic to do? Hide ourselves away from the world? Cut ourselves off from the course of human history? Deny ourselves advancements in technology? Travel? *Knowledge*?”

“Our powers are part of who we *are*!”

“So why did we run away with them? Hmm? Why didn’t we use them to make everything the Laysiders have happen *sooner*? That’s another thing—the Laysiders *share* what they have. Founders, you never saw such share-happy people! Every thought, every idea is put out there for everyone to benefit from. Some of the most powerful Layside men have given their entire fortunes away to help those who have nothing. It was like nothing I’d ever *seen* before.”

My head swam, and I took hold of the arm of the bench. I could see, now, why he'd been so distant. Why he'd acted so oddly. His mind, his *soul* had been churning over this dark knowledge. For weeks. Maybe months.

And yet, the other boys had been fine. Upon his return, Billy Illengast had joked about *butter*. "What about the others? The boys who went with you on Currens?"

Vincent's eyes flashed. "They don't care. Whenever I tried to talk to them about it, they told me I was nuts."

"Maybe they had a point."

Vincent ignored my statement, clearly exasperated. "The *point* is that it's up to us to make this right."

Us? "How? What do you want to do?"

"First of all, I think we need to petition the Adoption Bureau to allow modern Layside tech into the county. Then we'll go from there."

"But that's not how it's done. They keep us on a schedule. They bring things into All Hollows and keep them hidden until the time is right. They give blueprints to the factories so they know what to make, an—"

"And that's *wrong*."

I had no idea how to process this. Him telling me the Adoption Bureau schedule was wrong was like him telling me that the Great Creator had chosen the wrong color for the sky. And apparently, he wanted me to help him repaint it. "Vincent, you need to think this through."

"No. I've thought enough. The time has come to do something."

"*You need to think this through*. What you're saying—it's wild. And scary. All Hollows is the way it is for a reason. All the things they have in 2015—we'll have them, too. In time. Our grandchildren will. And our grandchildren will also have their *magic*, the thing the *Laysiders* wanted to eliminate from the world." That point infuriated me so much, I rephrased it for emphasis. "They *wanted* magic gone from the world, Vincent! They were willing to murder thousands of people to get rid of it! And you think they're *better* than us?"

Vincent clamped his jaw shut, and looked away. I realized that I'd wounded him, and my gut twisted. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt him. Founders, I *loved* him. He was the star I'd pinned to my sky back in *kindergarten*, the only star I'd ever wished upon. There were witches out there with career goals and artistic ambitions, but I wasn't one of them. The vast majority of girls in All Hollows got married before or after graduation, becoming kitchen witches, housewives, mothers—and given how inept I was with magic, I knew that was where *my* focus should be. So that was all I'd ever wanted, all I'd ever hoped for. A safe place, a happy home, beside the warlock I adored.

But what I said next only hurt him more. I couldn't help it.

"You weren't there," I choked out. "You weren't there yesterday, when a *trothenbeast* attacked me. And this is the reason?"

Vincent's brow furrowed. "Attacked you? What?"

"There was an accident. On Lanre Silversharp's land. Like I said, I tried to call you, to tell you... but you were obsessing over this. The *Laysiders*. Weren't you? Thinking about *their* world rather than your own. Did you forget about me, like Summerlene? Or just decide you didn't care?"

Vincent looked at me in shock. For a moment, I imagined that he might wrap me up in his arms and pull me toward the solid heat of his chest. Become his usual apologetic self. Fix things.

But, just like at the dance—my hopes fell flat.

The corner of his mouth twitched, almost as if he wanted to snarl. “You’re not hurt, are you? Maimed? Scarred for life?”

Confused, I said, “No.”

“Well, then. Maybe *you* should spend more time obsessing over the state of the world, and less time thinking about your own problems. *All Hollows* has problems, too. More important ones.”

My anger turned to ash in my mouth. I barely managed to breathe his name. “Vincent...”

“No! Let me talk.” His eyes matched his voice in intensity, and I found myself looking tearfully at my knees. “I shared this with you because I thought you’d understand. You’re smart, Everrose. Capable. And here you sound exactly like my father! A warlock so devoted to the past that he still drives the first car he ever bought and uses *his* grandfather’s wand. A warlock who can’t see the forest for the Ward!”

Tears were unwanted, but inevitable. Vincent was so... I couldn’t call him misguided. Or lost. Or even mixed-up. I wasn’t sure *what* he was.

“I’m sorry,” I sniffed. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’m just worried about you.”

“I don’t *want* your worry.” Vincent faced forward. “I need your help. I need you at my *side*. And if you’re not willing to do that... I need you to tell me, so I can move on.”

My heart seemed to stop. “Move on? You mean... break up?”

Vincent shrugged. The motion caused Leatherhyde to squeak inside his pocket. “If that’s what you want to call it.”

For a long time, I just looked at the boy. I had no thoughts. No voice. No sense of self. My heart was a storm; my mind was a wasteland. “As easily as that?” I asked, when I remembered how to breathe.

“Not easily.” Vincent’s eyes were bright. He blinked several times, but his expression remained stony. “None of this is easy. But it’s what I have to do.”

I wasn’t sure what to think. Vincent had my heart in his hand, but I loved All Hollows, too. I loved my town, my family, everything about it. I could consider leaving it for a time of carefree exploration, sure, but I’d always known I’d come back. Like nearly *everyone* else had, over the course of *centuries*.

“Please, Vincent,” I said. But he was already gathering up his books.

“Think it over,” he told me as he stood up. He caught my gaze, and held it. The disappointment in his eyes pierced me like a knife. “Please. I know it might be hard, but promise me you’ll *try*.”

“I will, Vincent, but please don’t leave...”

He did. He turned and walked out of the park, his long legs carrying him so quickly that I’d have to run to catch up.

And I felt incapable of running. As soon as he was out of sight, I collapsed back onto the bench. Things were worse than I’d ever imagined.

Much worse.

5

I am wandering across a charred field. I'm wearing high heels, and something beneath them, something on the ground, crunches with every tentative step I take.

I am afraid to look down and see what it is.

The air is smoky. And yet, the smoke is strangely beautiful—it curls up from the ground like ghostly writing, and lingers like an interrupted daydream. It stings my eyes and makes them water and blur; the landscape is thus softened even further. Like a filmmaker shooting through a lens smeared with petroleum jelly, everything I see is dreamy. Hazy.

Except for the trothenbeast.

It is clearly visible because it walks at my side, not an inch from my fingertips. Walks—on two legs, like a man, its great bulk angled forward and its lips pulled back in a snarl. The creature is unmuzzled. And yet, I am not afraid. I want it with me. My hand reaches out when it ventures too far ahead, my fingers sinking into a striped pelt as soft and dense as velvet.

The beast stops. Its enormous head turns in my direction. Its eyes glow blue in the gauzy darkness, and it releases a ticking rumble that seems, to my ears, more like a purr. I feel the rumble where our bodies meet—the tickle as it courses through my skin, the thrum as it enters my veins.

It is reassuring me.

And then, I hear what the beast must have heard long ago. The screaming. And beyond it a haunting, lovely song. One I don't immediately recognize. I know it's familiar, a song I've heard many times before, but my mind is so far away....

The smoke makes my head ache. My nostrils are full of the smell of fire. But there is no fire, or at least, none that I can see. The world appears as black-and-white as one of the monster movies shown at the Morpheum. Even my dress is silvery—long and elegant, strapless, fitted through the bodice with a belled skirt.

I am ready for a ball.

“Everrose!”

I look up. It's Vincent. He's wearing a tuxedo, and oh, he's a vision. A vision of hope and love, a sign that everything is going to be all right. I hurry forward, my hair whipping through the air, strands of it sticking to my lipstick.

Vincent lifts his hand, his brow contorted with worry. He wants me with him. He needs me. It's written upon his face. I sense his urgency, his fear, as his fingers imprison mine.

The beast growls.

~

“Earth to Everrose.”

Shaking my head, I looked at Summerlene. Her nose was wrinkled with concern, the wand of cotton candy in her hand completely forgotten.

Slowly, reality began to filter back to me. The screams of happy children; the distant roar of carnival rides; the sizzle of pumpkin-flavored funnel cakes. Next to us, a streamlined aluminum lemonade cart was blaring the Everly Brothers' version of “All I Have To Do Is Dream.” I cast a suspicious look at it. How did it know?

How did it know I couldn't get the dream I'd had the night before out of my head?

“Are you okay?” Summerlene asked.

“Yes,” I lied. I lied because although almost a week had passed since my encounter with Vincent, I still wasn't sure how to bring it up with anyone. Or if I even *should*.

I felt like—no. I *was* keeping a massive secret for him. He hadn't asked me to, but I was. After all, he was the boy I loved. The boy I hoped to marry. Did a wife tattle on her husband every time he entertained an eccentric whim?

That's what I kept telling myself. That Vincent was only experiencing a burst of inspiration, a sudden surge of interest in the Layside. I knew he'd never *forget* everything he'd seen on Currens. He was too smart for that. But my hope was that soon he'd funnel his newfound passion into politics, or his studies. That he'd start taking my calls again. Or seek me out, and tell me everything would be okay. That we could go back to normal.

Still... the dream refused to leave me. It'd woken me up about four o'clock that morning, and I'd been a mess since then.

“Sure,” Summerlene said as she lowered her brown eyes. “So, liquid diet?”

Blinking, I followed her gaze. I'd had an ice cream cone.

Had.

The cone was still clutched in my hand, but melted cinnamon-chip ice cream was dripping over my fingers. I dropped it with a disgusted sound and started digging around in the pocket of my jack-o'-lantern print dress for a handkerchief. With my *clean* hand.

“Here.” Summerlene had already found hers in the pocket of her pastel orange capris. “Use mine.”

I did so, sheepishly, training my eyes on my be-dribbled saddle shoes. Daisy, wearing a pink harness and leash, put one of her little paws on my left sock and squorped? up at me. Even the rodent was concerned.

“You usually love the Harvest Festival,” Summerlene said. “What’s eating you?”

“I... I’m just... blue.” With a shrug, I pocketed her dirty hanky so she wouldn’t have to carry it and angled my feet so I could wipe my shoes off on the half-dead grass. “I’m reduced to combing through the livestock tents at the county fair to see if my familiar’s in any of them. How would you feel?”

Summerlene patted my shoulder. “You’re right. I’m sorry. But don’t get frosted. We’ve still got time. School doesn’t start until next Monday.”

The way she said it, next Monday sounded like it lay twenty years in the future—not two days. The Harvest Festival marked the end of summer. It was the Autumnal Equinox, and that night—not even “that night,” in only a few hours—the enchanted stones that secured the Nestle Ward to All Hollows would be charged for another year.

It was a touching ceremony. A beautiful moment. I’d always loved to see it, but now....

Now, I wasn’t sure I had the heart to watch.

“Come on,” I said, moving forward. Summerlene urged her guinea pig to walk along with her, and drew a pair of cat-eye sunglasses from the pocket of her sleeveless white shirt. The pocket had a bat embroidered on it.

I tried my best not to look at it. It reminded me of Leatherhyde.

As the sun sank in the sky, we toured the rest of the livestock tents. Normally, I’d never go near the agricultural offerings at the Harvest Festival—not because I disdained the witches and warlocks who worked the land in All Hollows, but because I knew little about farming or raising animals. My family had always lived in Stoneset, in a house with a lawn instead of a garden. The closest thing we had to a family pet was Ears. My mother didn’t have a familiar.

Still, out of desperation, I looked. Half afraid I’d end up “familiar twinsies” with Summerlene, I walked past cages full of prize-winning rabbits, rats, and guinea pigs. None of them acted particularly thrilled to see me. I looked at chickens and owls, herding dogs and barn cats. I even visited the pens where the cattle and sheep were kept, breathing through my mouth and wondering, on the off-chance that one of them should low at me and charge the barrier, how much it would cost my father to keep a cow in hay.

But not a single animal so much as gave me a second glance. None of them felt the Connexion.

When we left the ungulate barn, the sky was a breathtaking golden orange—but I was bluer than ever. Summerlene was silent, and I suspected that the severity of my situation was beginning to dawn on her.

“I have to admit,” she finally said, “when you called to remind me that we were meeting up at the fair today? And that you still needed to find your familiar? For a second... I hoped you were joking.”

“Trust me—when I said it, I *wished* I was.”

“Well, there’s always...” She looked down the dirt path, through the crowd, toward a large green-striped tent. “There’s always the wildeor exhibition.”

I laughed. I was too tired to enjoy it. “No way I’m rating a wildeor. Only terrifically powerful witches and warlocks have wildeors as familiars.” Like Mayor Olwen.

“Well, I might not be ‘terrifically powerful,’ but that never stopped me from *wanting* one.” Summerlene sounded a little miffed.

“I’m sorry,” I said, realizing that I’d insulted her without meaning to. Again, poor Daisy. “But I never even dared to *want* one. Because I knew it’d never happen. I’m far too pathetic a witch to get something like that.”

My self-deprecation seemed to appease Summerlene. “Don’t put yourself down, Everrose.” She glanced at the tent again, and slid a baby pink nail over her lips. I could tell she wanted to go inside. “They say wildeors visit in dreams, first. Sometimes, parents pay for spells to make their kids dream about one, in hopes that they’ll actually get it.”

“Gee, the shucksters hawking those spells must make a pretty penny. I haven’t heard of a single teenager in All Hollows getting a wildeor this year. And it’d make the news if one did. Remember all the buzz last year over Donna Xue getting that wyvern?”

“Oh, Everrose. Come on.” Summerlene popped a brow. “Be serious. Have you ever dreamed about a wildeor?”

I thought about it—though it didn’t take much thought. I could still remember the smell of smoke, the crunching under my feet, and the sensation of sliding my fingers into the trothenbeast’s fur. But that hadn’t been a dream about a *wildeor*. That’d been a dream about Vincent. The beast had simply been *there*, a supporting character—likely called forth by my imagination from all the things churning around in my brain.

Before I could answer, Maple’s voice cut through the buzz of the crowd. “Everrose! Merle!”

“Swell, it’s our team mascot,” Summerlene muttered. I chuckled, before turning to locate my sister. She was scampering through the crowd, her purple-checked sundress bouncing and her hair in curls. Dad had insisted we dress up a little.

“The Recharging Ceremony’s going to start soon! Dad wants us!” Maple yelled, once she saw that she had my attention.

Summerlene hoisted her familiar into her arms, the charms on her obit bracelet twinkling in the sunlight. “Lead on, then. We’ll finish up later.”

It didn’t take us long to get to Fourstones Field proper. The Harvest Festival was designed to take place in a C-shape around it, leaving the sloping field empty and the rolling hill at its outer edge open to the air. This was a smart decision, as everyone could gather on the high side of Fourstones Field, the one closest to the ridge that rose toward Stoneset Hollow, and see not only everything taking place near the stones, but a panoramic view of the surrounding area.

As soon as Maple and I found Dad—who was chatting with Mr. and Mrs. Hayes, conveniently enough—I paused for a moment to sweep my eyes over the scenery. Fourstones Field melted down into Snow Hollow, but the land swooped up again on the other side, just beyond. To my left the land rose *sharply*, forming a near-vertical wall of fall-colored trees. Directly ahead of where I stood, though, the land sloped more gently, allowing for houses and small villages, clusters of winking lights in the growing darkness—like candles set into the stone wall of an ancient and crumbling monastery. And all the way out, as far as I could see, the land behaved the same way—running up and down, rippling and ridging, forming river valleys and high, snow-dusted mountains.

It was beautiful. So beautiful that the weight of Vincent's words hit me anew, like a hex between the eyes. Once more, I lapsed into thought.

Beside me, Maple worked diligently toward her goal of polishing off a bag of kettle corn as big as she was. Above me, Summerlene and the adults talked. Her mother, Sherrie, was a bottle-blond witch with kohled eyes, red lips, and flawless tan skin. Perky and big-hearted, she was younger than my own mother, having given birth to Summerlene when she was our age. Meanwhile, her father, Tony, had massive arms, a bushy moustache, and a booming laugh that Summerlene and I had often used as a locating beacon when we were small children. He was a shift supervisor at the Magi-Vision factory, churning out Adoption Bureau-approved televisions and visual recording equipment.

In a weird twist of fate, both of her parents had corgis as familiars. The dogs cavorted with Ears, weaving playful loops about our legs.

As the last of the sunlight faded away, the colorful electric lights mounted on the games and rides behind us served as our only illumination. The crowd continued to grow in spite of the darkness, each new member contributing to an excited rustle that belied its size. A few minutes later, Summerlene forgot what the adults had to say, her eyes fastening upon something in the gloom. Removing her sunglasses, she grabbed my shoulder and whispered, "It's him!"

Applause trickled through the crowd as other people noticed him, too. With Clackwell slithering at his side, Mayor Olwen strode toward the center of the field—to the epicenter of the stones. Several members of the Stoneset Town Council followed in his wake, as well as two men I didn't know. Politicians or bigwigs from other towns within All Hollows, most likely. Together they made up a party of eight, excluding their various familiars.

When he reached the center of the stones, Mayor Olwen stopped and waited for the others to catch up. Once they had, he lifted his hand and cast a spell. As I watched, wisps of glittering energy began to dance in the air. A few seconds later, they resolved into brass butterfly-winged lanterns. Flapping smoothly, never sinking, the lanterns bathed Mayor Olwen and his cohorts in a soft, warm light. By that light I could see the Mayor was dressed in a three-piece suit of black velvet, with a flash of bright orange satin peeping out of his jacket pocket.

And on his hip—tucked into the traditional embossed leather sheath, attached to a wide black belt—he wore his wand. I'd seen it up close, once before. It was stunning, antique, crafted of solid silver and decorated with art nouveau flourishes.

The other warlocks were similarly outfitted. With a command from Mayor Olwen, they moved into position—two to each cardinal compass point—and unsheathed their wands. Each pairing joined their wands together, with the points facing a stone.

"Alight!" Mayor Olwen bellowed.

Beneath the warlocks' feet, a ring of glowing green light began to materialize. A ward root, notched with four pairs of triangular markers and teeming with magical symbols. Hovering a few inches above the grass, the root rotated until it clicked into place, its notches matching up with the positions the warlocks had assumed. At that precise moment, jets of green energy erupted from each wand pairing. The burst was short, and made a sound like a dying firework fizzling back to earth. The crowd cheered.

And the stones glowed to life.

The stones of Fourstones Field were crafted of a dull black mineral that, in its dormant state, seemed to suck up every particle of nearby light. Each was as tall as a man, and rough with carvings—runes, spells, blessings, ancient alchemical symbols. *Tales of the Founders* had been sadly Eurocentric; in truth, the Great Founders had been of many ethnicities, many nationalities, and this was evident upon the stones. Native American, African, and European strains of magic commingled upon their surfaces, all designed toward the same end.

Now, those etchings pulsed with green energy, and their story would be told.

Mayor Olwen didn't use a spell to project his voice. He didn't need to. The crowd was rapt, respectful. "Tonight, we gather to pay our respects to the nine Great Founders of All Hollows, and to charge the Nestle Ward for another year by that most potent of magics—sacrifice.

"But, more importantly, tonight we gather to look upon the Nestle Ward itself. As our society hurtles through its days, we seldom pay the Ward much attention. After all, the Time of Immigration is long over. Nearly a hundred years have passed since a witch or warlock approached the Ward, seeking admittance. And today our Town Clerk, Mr. Matthias Leswond, informed me that it's been exactly forty-six years since any correspondence—other than Adoption Bureau imports—has come or gone through the Ward."

The Mayor paused for a moment and allowed the crowd to digest this. Once again, my thoughts turned to Vincent. All Hollows was the only magical community of its kind, that anyone knew of. Witches and warlocks lived on the Layside, still, but they were so rare and abstract and unknown that I could hardly conceive of how they must survive. How could Vincent even think of changing our one safe space?

"And yet, it is the Nestle Ward itself that allows us the luxury of forgetting. It is the Nestle Ward that, like a good and caring mother, urges us to pursue our own lives even should it mean putting her, the *source* of life, out of our thoughts."

The crowd murmured with appreciation. Maple crunched her popcorn.

"And so, let us acknowledge the Great Founders, and thank them for the gift they bestowed upon us." Mayor Olwen recited the names, as he did every year. Gregory Greensmith. Morris Braintree. Arielle Kellyer. Dancing Brook. Benjamin Silversharp. As he said each name, he spoke about that person's contribution to the Ward—materials they'd known to utilize, protective spells they'd thought to weave in.

He ended with, "And Marie-Hélène de Naissance, who oversaw the design of the Ward and provided it with energy."

"I always forget her name," Mrs. Hayes whispered to her husband.

"Eh, I don't think she was really that important," he said, reassuring her with a pat on the arm.

Mayor Olwen carried on. "But that energy wanes each year. Tonight, I call upon seven of you to supply it with the energy it requires, alongside myself. Who will volunteer?"

This was it. The moment. Who would volunteer to feed energy into the stones? It wasn't a *dire* sacrifice. No one ever died. A witch or warlock's self-protective instincts would kick in long before death became a concern—in short, they'd pass out. But it was a sacrifice all the same, leaving the volunteers weakened and vulnerable until their bodies could replenish their reserves of magical energy.

The two bigwig strangers raised their hands, as did a member of the Town Council. Laughter and cries of surprise echoed from various points in the crowd, as witches and warlocks stepped forward to offer their

services. Wands were exchanged, and soon eight more magical folks were arranged in pairs with their wands joined together, repeating the formation from earlier.

Mayor Olwen and the Council members hurried about, issuing quick instructions, handshakes, and a few pats on the back. The ward root rotated in response, realigning itself. As I understood it, the ward root would automatically direct any magical energy cast from inside its confines, which meant that the volunteers didn't have to learn a special spell. All they had to do was listen to Mayor Olwen, and let go.

Once everyone was ready, the Mayor resumed his position. Waving his free arm like a conductor, he shouted, "Are we good?"

The volunteers answered in the affirmative.

"Remember, all you need to do is feed the Ward. Pure energy, with no intent. So relax, take a breath, and..." Mayor Olwen steadied his own stance. "Alight!"

Electric green light shot out of the assembled wands and slammed into the stones, causing them to appear radioactive. The magical energy then continued upward at a ninety-degree angle, each blast jetting off into the heavens like a shot fired from a ray gun.

Forgetting myself for a moment, I found Maple's and Summerlene's hands and squeezed them. I knew what was coming. They returned the gesture, right there with me.

The rays struck the Nestle Ward miles above—the invisible, but physical termination of the area that All Hollows County occupied. Together, we watched as the Ward itself shivered and slowed, like the stilling minute hand of a dying clock. The stars skidded, leaving trails of light in the sky; inky night became lavender dawn, or appeared to. And then....

The best part.

The ward root expanded with a pop, traveling so fast that it practically blinked out of existence. A ring of color began to sparkle at the edge of the Ward, all around the horizon. As the sacrificial volunteers continued to feed all they had into the stones, the ring swooped upward and highlighted the entirety of the dome. A sound like thunder rang out as the colors met at the apex.

Volunteers began to drop. The Ward flashed, fat with energy. But the colors ran on forever, a sky-wide rainbow that faded with each blink, a fairy-kissed twilight that I nursed, slowly, as it bled away.

The cheer that followed was enormous. I knew that it came not only from the crowd gathered on Fourstones Field, but from everywhere within All Hollows.

We were safe. For another year, anyway.

Summerlene and I joined in the festive screaming. We laughed, and hugged one another. As I parted from her, I noticed that medics had already arrived to collect the volunteers and escort them to the hospital. Mayor Olwen was still on his feet, which was no small miracle. Exhausted, skin bloodless, the warlock managed to shake a few more hands as the volunteers' families and his Councilmen joined him on the field.

It didn't take me long to realize that Vincent wasn't among them.

As I resigned myself to this fact, the Mayor looked my way. I was surprised by this, and tried to avert my eyes. But before I could, he frowned and shook his head.

He knew I was searching for his son. But I wasn't sure if he understood *why*. After waving a weak acknowledgment, I turned back to Summerlene.

"That was out of this world," she gushed. "Gosh, weren't those colors just luscious?"

“Yeah,” I said as darkness settled about us once more.

“Anyway, now we can go to the wildeor exhibition!”

I couldn’t think of anything I’d rather do less. “Um, I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Girls.” It was my father. “Wherever you go, take Maple with you. Meet us on the midway at ten. Mr. and Mrs. Hayes and I still have some catching up to do.”

The look on Dad’s face told me he was enjoying his time away from work. I decided that I didn’t want to ruin it for him. Ignoring Maple’s triumphant look, I took her by the hand and moved to follow Summerlene toward the lights of the fair.

“I want to ride the Ferris wheel,” Maple said the minute we were out of earshot. “And after that, I want to ride the Ferris wheel *again*.”

“No dice,” Summerlene told her. “We’re going to look at the wildeors.”

Maple’s eyes widened. “But we got an *eyeful* of wildeor the other day. I don’t want to see another until I’m... fifty? Fifty’s good.”

“Tough beans!” Summerlene tossed her perfectly wavy hair. “It’s for your sister.”

“What? You don’t think you’re going to get a wildeor, do you?” Maple looked at me—and then turned red. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to be nasty again!”

“It’s fine,” I said. “And no, I don’t. But Summerlene wants to go.”

Together we navigated a maze of carnival games and balloons, buskers and treat wagons, until we came to the green-striped tent. Summerlene ushered us inside with a grin.

My breath caught in my throat.

The wildeor exhibition was set up like the other agricultural tents—one aisle of hard-packed dirt, with large pens on either side. Illuminated glass orbs hovered near the ceiling, and the ground was strewn with hay. The place was Antsville, and the combined body heat of scores of witches and warlocks made the air feel hot and stale.

In a bunch, we walked past displays filled with amazing animals and their products. The largest crowd was gathered around the dragon pen, where a juvenile dragon with ruby scales was being shown. Too young to breathe fire, it remained on the far side of its pen, but seemed willing to tolerate the crowd’s attention—even puffing out the gill-like constructions on the sides of its neck, the bellows for its future throat furnace, to show off their speckled patterning.

“Ooh, look!” Summerlene said. “A mothman!”

There was a mothman. And a Jersey devil. And glass bottles full of grass sprites, and disappearing cats, and enormous insects as intelligent as dogs. From them there was milk with healing properties, and scales as tough as steel, and whiskers that, someone had discovered a few years back, vastly improved sound fidelity when used in place of needles on Layside record players.

Summerlene vetted them all. It was obvious that she was trying to see if any of them would approach *her*, even with Daisy clasped in her arms. Exhausted as I was, I felt bad for her.

Until something else claimed my attention, and my sympathy.

Grabbing my sister by the hand, I rushed across the aisle with her and her giant bag of kettle corn. There, we encountered another large group of people. On the other side of it, an iron cage sat on an elevated platform.

“It’s the trothenbeast,” Maple gasped.

It was. The creature, muzzled and manacled, wasn’t even permitted to pace inside its enclosure. It was hogtied, lying on its side, unable to move its head—to turn away from the gawking spectators gathered only a few feet in front of its face. Despite the chatter of the crowd, I could hear a low rumble coursing from the cage. The beast was angry.

I was angry.

Heat rising in my body, I looked over the rest of the booth. It was filled with stuffed heads, mounted horns, preserved pelts, and exotic skulls. And in the midst of them, in a high-backed leather chair under a banner embroidered with the words *The Natural History of All Hollows*, sat Lanre Silversharp. He wore a blue pinstriped suit, and had a cigar clamped between his lips.

He’d done it. He’d displayed his catch.

“How’d you finally nab it?” a lanky warlock in a straw hat asked from the front of the crowd.

Mr. Silversharp exhaled a cool trail of smoke. I flashed back to my dream, and had to blink to dispel the vision. “They might be smart, but they’re still animals. All I had to do was tire it out. Patience, that’s the name of the game. Hunting is a thinking man’s sport.”

“You said they can talk, right?” a little black-haired witch asked. “Can you make it say something?”

Lanre’s smile twitched. “I could.” He leaned into the child’s face, and she squeaked in surprise. “But to do that, little girl, I’d have to take its muzzle off. And I’m afraid that thing could eat you up in one. Big. Bite. So I’d rather not risk it.”

“But...” She looked at the beast again, her voice tremulous. “It’s only got a belt around its mouth.”

“The muzzle’s enchanted, just like the ropes. Don’t worry. Strong as my own will, that thing.” Mr. Silversharp reached inside his vest and pulled out a golden key. The key had a miniature chain snaking about it, and a large green stone set into its bow. “The only thing that’ll open it is this.”

“Is it male or female?” a young warlock with a chickadee on his shoulder called out.

“Male. I’ve taken to calling it ‘Typhon.’” Mr. Silversharp sat back in his chair—and finally noticed me. His brown eyes narrowed, and he took another drag off his cigar. “It means ‘the father of all monsters.’”

After a few seconds spent supporting myself on my toes, stretching my legs as long as they would go, I grew frustrated. Holding tight to Maple, I started to push through the crowd. I ignored her cries; I ignored Summerlene’s advice to leave. Mumbling apologies and pressing my body unrelentingly forward, I fought my way to the side of the cage.

As I emerged from the crowd, the beast’s eyes rolled in my direction. Its—*his*—rumble lowered, and became richer. His pupils—his strangely human, round pupils—dilated, and I was struck by the wild notion that he might recognize me.

Heart pounding, I returned his steady gaze. In that moment, I forgot to be afraid. Instead I had the sudden, insane urge to wrap my hands around the bars that stood between us. He was a powerful, majestic animal, a primal force, a being of legend that should be haunting the dark and terrifying places within All Hollows—not sitting in a cage. To be hunted and imprisoned by someone like Mr. Silversharp, cruelly bound and shown off like a jar of jam at the fair....

Even if the beast *had* scared me half to death, he didn’t deserve that.

My summer drew to a close in the second it took me to shut my eyes and block out the gold of his own. An overwhelming feeling of helplessness crashed into me—helplessness, and anger, and fear. Everything I was sure the beast must also be experiencing. My empathy for him mingled with my own self-pity, becoming a force that seemed to tie my brain and heart into knots. A mess of confusion and wonder so all-encompassing that it left me in a spin, unable to think of a time when I hadn't felt it. A...

Wait.

My mouth went dry. My heart thumped violently against my ribs.

Was this the Connexion?

I opened my eyes, but I didn't see anything. I didn't hear anything. The crowd of people and familiar animals had all but vanished, leaving me isolated by my own sense of wonder, my own foreboding.

Quickly, I tried to analyze the situation. After our first encounter, I'd been curious about the trothenbeast. But now, I empathized with him. I *identified* with him. In his eyes I saw so many things, so many *human* things. I was terrified of him, too, and yet... I also felt, for him, the same thing I'd once felt for the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

Compassion.

I'd even dreamed about him. In a weird sort of way. And in that dream, he hadn't hurt me—just as he'd done nothing to hurt me back at Mr. Silversharp's estate. Vincent was right. I'd been frightened, then, and reacted as anyone would, but truthfully... I hadn't almost *died*. Looking back, I could now see that claim was pure dramatics.

In the forest, the beast had looked at me, and run away. He'd not disturbed a hair on my head.

He'd shown *me* compassion, perhaps.

Before I knew it, I was moving. Stepping forward, I wrapped my hands around the bars and used them to pull myself up until I was standing on the platform beside the cage. Children gasped. Ladies screamed.

And the beast rumbled at me, his eyes rounding with curiosity.

Turning my head toward Mr. Silversharp, I said, "Typhon. Terrific name—for my *familiar*."

Mr. Silversharp rocketed to his feet. A new and terrible sharpness entered his eyes. "You! You get down from there, missy!"

"Not before you let my familiar out, and give me that key!" My face was hot, and my throat burned as I struggled to speak forcefully. "I feel the Connexion with him. I dreamed about him last night. He'd be throwing himself at the bars to get to me, if you hadn't tied him up!"

"You're lying!" Mr. Silversharp said as he extended his entire arm to point at me. "You little hussy. You're blatantly *lying* in front of all these people!"

"Prove it!" I challenged. "He's my familiar, so your claims to him are void! He's my familiar..." I glanced into his eyes. "And I'm taking him home."