

1.

In Which a Story Is Told

Yes.

There is a witch in the woods. There has always been a witch.

Will you stop your fidgeting for once? My stars! I have never seen such a fidgety child.

No, sweetheart, I have not seen her. No one has. Not for ages. We've taken steps so that we will never see her.

Terrible steps.

Don't make me say it. You already know, anyway.

Oh, I don't know, darling. No one knows why she wants children. We don't know why she insists that it must always be the very youngest among us. It's not as though we could just ask her. She hasn't been seen. We make sure that she will not be seen.

Of course she exists. What a question! Look at the woods! So dangerous! Poisonous smoke and sinkholes and boiling geysers and terrible dangers every which way. Do you think it is so by accident? Rubbish! It was the Witch, and if we don't do as she says, what will become of us?

You really need me to explain it?

I'd rather not.

Oh, hush now, don't cry. It's not as though the Council of Elders is coming for you, now is it. You're far too old.

From our family?

Yes, dearest. Ever so long ago. Before you were born. He was a beautiful boy.

Now finish your supper and see to your chores. We'll all be up early tomorrow. The Day of Sacrifice waits for no one, and we must all be present to thank the child who will save us for one more year.

Your brother? How could I fight for him? If I had, the Witch would have killed us all and then where would we be? Sacrifice one or sacrifice all. That is the way of the world. We couldn't change it if we tried.

Enough questions. Off with you. Fool child.

2.

In Which an Unfortunate Woman Goes Quite Mad

Grand Elder Gherland took his time that morning. The Day of Sacrifice only came once a year, after all, and he liked to look his best during the sober procession to the cursed house, and during the somber retreat. He encouraged the other Elders to do the same. It was important to give the populace a show.

He carefully dabbed rouge on his sagging cheeks and lined his eyes with thick streaks of kohl. He checked his teeth in the mirror, ensuring they were free of debris or goop. He loved that mirror. It was the only one in the Protectorate. Nothing gave Gherland more pleasure than the possession of a thing that was unique unto him. He liked being *special*.

The Grand Elder had ever so many possessions that were unique in the Protectorate. It was one of the perks of the job.

The Protectorate—called the Cattail Kingdom by some and the City of Sorrows by others—was sandwiched between a treacherous forest on one side and an enormous bog on the other. Most people in the Protectorate drew their livelihoods from the Bog. There was a future in bogwalking, mothers told their children. Not much of a future, you understand, but it was better than nothing. The Bog was full of Zirin shoots in the spring and Zirin flowers in the summer and Zirin bulbs in the fall—in addition to a wide array of medicinal and borderline magical plants that could be harvested, prepared, treated, and sold to the Traders from the other side of the forest, who in turn transported the fruits of the Bog to the Free Cities, far away. The forest itself was terribly dangerous, and navigable only by the Road.

And the Elders owned the Road.

Which is to say that Grand Elder Gherland owned the Road, and the other Elders had their cut. The Elders owned the Bog, too. And the orchards. And the houses. And the market squares. Even the garden plots.

This was why the families of the Protectorate made their shoes out of reeds. This was why, in lean times, they fed their children the thick, rich broth of the Bog, hoping that the Bog would make them strong.

This was why the Elders and their families grew big and strong and rosy-cheeked on beef and butter and beer.

The door knocked.

“Enter,” Grand Elder Gherland mumbled as he adjusted the drape of his robe.

It was Antain. His nephew. An Elder-in-Training, but only because Gherland, in a moment of weakness, had promised the ridiculous boy’s more ridiculous mother. But that was unkind. Antain was a nice enough young man, nearly thirteen. He was a hard worker and a quick study. He was good with numbers and clever with his hands and could build a comfortable bench for a tired Elder as quick as breathing. And, despite himself, Gherland had developed an inexplicable, and growing, fondness for the boy.

But.

Antain had big ideas. Grand notions. And *questions*. Gherland furrowed his brow. Antain was—how could he put it? *Overly keen*. If this kept up, he’d have to be dealt with, blood or no. The thought of it weighed upon Gherland’s heart, like a stone.

“UNCLE GHERLAND!” Antain nearly bowled his uncle over with his insufferable enthusiasm.

“Calm yourself, boy!” the Elder snapped. “This is a solemn occasion!”

The boy calmed visibly, his eager, doglike face tilted toward the ground. Gherland resisted the urge to pat him gently

on the head. "I have been sent," Antain continued in a mostly soft voice, "to tell you that the other Elders are ready. And all the populace waits along the route. Everyone is accounted for."

"Each one? There are no shirkers?"

"After last year, I doubt there ever will be again," Antain said with a shudder.

"Pity." Gherland checked his mirror again, touching up his rouge. He rather enjoyed teaching the occasional lesson to the citizens of the Protectorate. It clarified things. He tapped the sagging folds under his chin and frowned. "Well, Nephew," he said with an artful swish of his robes, one that had taken him over a decade to perfect. "Let us be off. That baby isn't going to sacrifice itself, after all." And he flowed into the street with Antain stumbling at his heels.



Normally, the Day of Sacrifice came and went with all the pomp and gravity that it ought. The children were given over without protest. Their numb families mourned in silence, with pots of stew and nourishing foods heaped into their kitchens, while the comforting arms of neighbors circled around them to ease their bereavement.

Normally, no one broke the rules.

But not this time.

Grand Elder Gherland pressed his lips into a frown. He could hear the mother's howling before the procession turned

onto the final street. The citizens began to shift uncomfortably where they stood.

When they arrived at the family's house, an astonishing sight met the Council of Elders. A man with a scratched-up face and a swollen lower lip and bloody bald spots across his skull where his hair had been torn out in clumps met them at the door. He tried to smile, but his tongue went instinctively to the gap where a tooth had just recently been. He sucked in his lips and attempted to bow instead.

"I am sorry, sirs," said the man—the father, presumably. "I don't know what has gotten into her. It's like she's gone mad."

From the rafters above them, a woman screeched and howled as the Elders entered the house. Her shiny black hair flew about her head like a nest of long, writhing snakes. She hissed and spat like a cornered animal. She clung to the ceiling beams with one arm and one leg, while holding a baby tightly against her breast with the other arm.

"GET OUT!" she screamed. "You *cannot* have her. I spit on your faces and curse your names. Leave my home at once, or I shall tear out your eyes and throw them to the crows!"

The Elders stared at her, openmouthed. They couldn't *believe* it. No one fought for a doomed child. It simply wasn't *done*.

(Antain alone began to cry. He did his best to hide it from the adults in the room.)

Gherland, thinking fast, affixed a kindly expression on his

craggy face. He turned his palms toward the mother to show her that he meant no harm. He gritted his teeth behind his smile. All this kindness was nearly killing him.

“We are not taking her at all, my poor, misguided girl,” Gherland said in his most patient voice. “The *Witch* is taking her. We are simply doing as we’re told.”

The mother made a guttural sound, deep in her chest, like an angry bear.

Gherland laid his hand on the shoulder of the perplexed husband and gave a gentle squeeze. “It appears, my good fellow, that you are right: your wife *has* gone mad.” He did his best to cover his rage with a façade of concern. “A rare case, of course, but not without precedent. We must respond with compassion. She needs care, not blame.”

“LIAR,” the woman spat. The child began to cry, and the woman climbed even higher, putting each foot on parallel rafters and bracing her back against the slope of the roof, trying to position herself in such a way that she could remain out of reach while she nursed the baby. The child calmed instantly. “If you take her,” she said with a growl, “I will find her. I will find her and take her back. You see if I won’t.”

“And face the *Witch*?” Gherland laughed. “All on your own? Oh, you pathetic, lost soul.” His voice was honey, but his face was a glowing ember. “Grief has made you lose your senses. The shock has shattered your poor mind. No matter. We shall heal you, dear, as best we can. Guards!”

He snapped his fingers, and armed guards poured into the room. They were a special unit, provided as always by the Sisters of the Star. They wore bows and arrows slung across their backs and short, sharp swords sheathed at their belts. Their long braided hair looped around their waists, where it was cinched tight—a testament to their years of contemplation and combat training at the top of the Tower. Their faces were implacable as stones, and the Elders, despite their power and stature, edged away from them. The Sisters were a frightening force. Not to be trifled with.

“Remove the child from the lunatic’s clutches and escort the poor dear to the Tower,” Gherland ordered. He glared at the mother in the rafters, who had gone suddenly very pale. “The Sisters of the Star know what to do with broken minds, my dear. I’m sure it hardly hurts at all.”

The Guard was efficient, calm, and utterly ruthless. The mother didn’t stand a chance. Within moments, she was bound, hobbled, and carried away. Her howls echoed through the silent town, ending suddenly when the Tower’s great wooden doors slammed shut, locking her inside.

The baby, on the other hand, once transferred into the arms of the Grand Elder, whimpered briefly and then turned her attention to the sagging face in front of her, all wobbles and creases and folds. She had a solemn look to her—calm, skeptical, and intense, making it difficult for Gherland to look away. She had black curls and black eyes. Luminous skin, like

polished amber. In the center of her forehead, she had a birthmark in the shape of a crescent moon. The mother had a similar mark. Common lore insisted that such people were special. Gherland disliked lore, as a general rule, and he certainly disliked it when citizens of the Protectorate got it in their heads to think themselves better than they were. He deepened his frown and leaned in close, wrinkling his brow. The baby stuck out her tongue.

Horrible child, Gherland thought.

“Gentlemen,” he said with all the ceremony he could muster, “it is time.” The baby chose this particular moment to let loose a large, warm, wet stain across the front of Gherland’s robes. He pretended not to notice, but inwardly he fumed.

She had done it on purpose. He was sure of it. What a revolting baby.

The procession was, as usual, somber, slow, and insufferably plodding. Gherland felt he might go mad with impatience. Once the Protectorate’s gates closed behind them, though, and the citizens returned with their melancholy broods of children to their drab little homes, the Elders quickened their pace.

“But why are we running, Uncle?” Antain asked.

“Hush, boy!” Gherland hissed. “And keep up!”

No one liked being in the forest, away from the Road. Not even the Elders. Not even Gherland. The area just outside the Protectorate walls was safe enough. In theory. But everyone

knew someone who had accidentally wandered too far. And fell into a sinkhole. Or stepped in a mud pot, boiling off most of their skin. Or wandered into a swale where the air was bad, and never returned. The forest was dangerous.

They followed a winding trail to the small hollow surrounded by five ancient trees, known as the Witch's Handmaidens. Or six. *Didn't it used to be five?* Gherland glared at the trees, counted them again, and shook his head. There were six. No matter. The forest was just getting to him. Those trees were almost as old as the world, after all.

The space inside of the ring of trees was mossy and soft, and the Elders laid the child upon it, doing their best not to look at her. They had turned their backs on the baby and started to hurry away when their youngest member cleared his throat.

"So. We just leave her here?" Antain asked. "That's how it's done?"

"Yes, Nephew," Gherland said. "That is how it's done." He felt a sudden wave of fatigue settling on his shoulders like an ox's yoke. He felt his spine start to sag.

Antain pinched his neck—a nervous habit that he couldn't break. "Shouldn't we wait for the Witch to arrive?"

The other Elders fell into an uncomfortable silence.

"Come again?" Elder Raspin, the most decrepit of the Elders, asked.

“Well, surely . . .” Antain’s voice trailed off. “Surely we must wait for the Witch,” he said quietly. “What would become of us if wild animals came first and carried her off?”

The other Elders stared at the Grand Elder, their lips tight.

“Fortunately, Nephew,” he said quickly, leading the boy away, “that has never been a problem.”

“But—” Antain said, pinching his neck again, so hard he left a mark.

“But nothing,” Gherland said, a firm hand on the boy’s back, striding quickly down the well-trodden path.

And, one by one, the Elders filed out, leaving the baby behind.

They left knowing—all but Antain—that it was not a matter of *if* the child were eaten by animals, but rather that she surely *would be*.

They left her knowing that there surely *wasn’t* a witch. There never *had* been a witch. There were only a dangerous forest and a single road and a thin grip on a life that the Elders had enjoyed for generations. The Witch—that is, the belief in her—made for a frightened people, a subdued people, a compliant people, who lived their lives in a saddened haze, the clouds of their grief numbing their senses and dampening their minds. It was terribly convenient for the Elders’ unencumbered rule. Unpleasant, too, of course, but that couldn’t be helped.

They heard the child whimper as they tramped through the trees, but the whimpering soon gave way to the swamp

sighs and birdsong and the woody creaking of trees throughout the forest. And each Elder felt as sure as sure could be that the child wouldn't live to see the morning, and that they would never hear her, never see her, never think of her again.

They thought she was gone forever.

They were wrong, of course.

3.

In Which a Witch Accidentally Enmagics an Infant

At the center of the forest was a small swamp—bubbly, sulfury, and noxious, fed and warmed by an underground, restlessly sleeping volcano and covered with a slick of slime whose color ranged from poison green to lightning blue to blood red, depending on the time of year. On this day—so close to the Day of Sacrifice in the Protectorate, or Star Child Day everywhere else—the green was just beginning to inch its way toward blue.

At the edge of the swamp, standing right on the fringe of flowering reeds growing out of the muck, a very old woman leaned on a gnarled staff. She was short and squat and a bit bulbous about the belly. Her crinkly gray hair had been pulled back

into a thick, braided knot, with leaves and flowers growing out of the thin gaps between the twisted plaits. Her face, despite its cloud of annoyance, maintained a brightness in those aged eyes and a hint of a smile in that flat, wide mouth. From certain angles, she looked a bit like a large, good-tempered toad.

Her name was Xan. And she was the Witch.

“Do you think you can hide from me, you ridiculous monster?” she bellowed at the swamp. “It isn’t as though I don’t know where you are. Resurface *this minute* and apologize.” She pressed her expression into something closely resembling a scowl. “*Or I will make you.*” Though she had no real power over the monster himself—he was far too old—she certainly had the power to make that swamp cough him up as if he were nothing more than a glob of phlegm in the back of the throat. She could do it with just a flick of her left hand and a jiggle of her right knee.

She attempted to scowl again.

“I MEAN IT,” she hollered.

The thick water bubbled and swirled, and the large head of the swamp monster slurped out of the bluish-green. He blinked one wide eye, and then the other, before rolling both toward the sky.

“Don’t you roll your eyes at me, young man,” the old woman huffed.

“Witch,” the monster murmured, his mouth still half-submerged in the thick waters of the swamp. “I am many

centuries older than you.” His wide lips blew a bubble in the algae slick. *Millennia, really*, he thought. *But who’s counting?*

“I don’t believe I like your tone.” Xan puckered her wrinkled lips into a tight rosette in the middle of her face.

The monster cleared his throat. “As the Poet famously said, dear lady: ‘*I don’t give a rat’s—*’”

“GLERK!” the Witch shouted, aghast. “Language!”

“Apologies,” Glerk said mildly, though he really didn’t mean it. He eased both sets of arms onto the muck at the shore, pressing each seven-fingered hand into the shine of the mud. With a grunt, he heaved himself onto the grass. *This used to be easier*, he thought. Though, for the life of him, he couldn’t remember when.

“Fyrian is over there by the vents, crying his eyes out, poor thing,” Xan fumed. Glerk sighed deeply. Xan thrust her staff onto the ground, sending a spray of sparks from the tip, surprising them both. She glared at the swamp monster. “And you are just *being mean*.” She shook her head. “He’s only a baby, after all.”

“My dear Xan,” Glerk said, feeling a rumble deep in his chest, which he hoped sounded imposing and dramatic, and not like someone who was simply coming down with a cold. “He is *also* older than you are. And it is high time—”

“Oh, you know what I mean. And anyway, I promised his mother.”

“For five hundred years, give or take a decade or two, that

dragonling has persisted in these delusions—fed and perpetuated by you, my dear. How is this helping him? He is not a Simply Enormous Dragon. At this point, there is no indication that he ever will be. There is no shame at all in being a Perfectly Tiny Dragon. Size isn't everything, you know. His is an ancient and honorable species, filled with some of the greatest thinkers of the Seven Ages. He has much to be proud of."

"His mother was very clear—" Xan began, but the monster interrupted her.

"In any case, the time is long past that he know his heritage and his place in the world. I've gone along with this fiction for far longer than I should have. But now . . ." Glerk pressed his four arms to the ground and eased his massive bottom under the curve of his spine, letting his heavy tail curl around the whole of him like a great, glistening snail's shell. He let the paunch of his belly sag over his folded legs. "I don't know, my dear. Something has shifted." A cloud passed over his damp face, but Xan shook her head.

"Here we go again," she scoffed.

"As the Poet says, '*Oh ever changéd Earth—*'"

"Hang the Poet. Go apologize. Do it right now. He looks up to you." Xan glanced at the sky. "I must fly, my dear. I'm already late. *Please*. I am counting on you."

Glerk lumbered toward the Witch, who laid her hand on his great cheek. Though he was able to walk upright, he often preferred to move on all sixes—or all sevens, with the use of

his tail as an occasional limb, or all fives, if he happened to be using one of his hands to pluck a particularly fragrant flower and bring it to his nose, or to collect rocks, or to play a haunting tune on a hand-carved flute. He pressed his massive forehead to Xan's tiny brow.

"Please be careful," he said, his voice thick. "I have been beset of late by troubling dreams. I worry about you when you are gone." Xan raised her eyebrows, and Glerk leaned his face away with a low grumble. "Fine," he said. "I will perpetuate the fiction for our friend Fyrian. '*The path to Truth is in the dreaming heart,*' the Poet tells us."

"That's the spirit!" Xan said. She clucked her tongue and blew the monster a kiss. And she vaulted up and forward on her staff's fulcrum, sprinting away into the green.

Despite the odd beliefs of the people of the Protectorate, the forest was not cursed at all, nor was it magical in any way. But it was dangerous. The volcano beneath the forest—low-sloped and impossibly wide—was a tricky thing. It grumbled as it slept, while heating geysers till they burst and restlessly worrying at fissures until they grew so deep that no one could find the bottom. It boiled streams and cooked mud and sent waterfalls disappearing into deep pits, only to reappear miles away. There were vents that spewed foul odors and vents that spewed ash and vents that seemed to spew nothing at all—until a person's lips and fingernails turned blue from bad air, and the whole world started to spin.

The only truly safe passage across the forest for an ordinary person was the Road, which was situated on a naturally raised seam of rock that had smoothed over time. The Road didn't alter or shift; it never grumbled. Unfortunately, it was owned and operated by a gang of thugs and bullies from the Protectorate. Xan never took the Road. She couldn't abide thugs. Or bullies. And anyway, they charged too much. Or they did, last time she checked. It had been years since she had gone near it—many centuries now. She made her own way instead, using a combination of magic and know-how and common sense.

Her treks across the forest weren't easy by any means. But they were necessary. A child was waiting for her, just outside the Protectorate. A child whose very life depended on her arrival—and she needed to get there in time.

For as long as Xan could remember, every year at about the same time, a mother from the Protectorate left her baby in the forest, presumably to die. Xan had no idea why. Nor did she judge. But she wasn't going to let the poor little thing perish, either. And so, every year, she traveled to that circle of sycamores and gathered the abandoned infant in her arms, carrying the child to the other side of the forest, to one of the Free Cities on the other side of the Road. These were happy places. And they loved children.

At the curve of the trail, the walls of the Protectorate came into view. Xan's quick steps slowed to a plod. The Protectorate

itself was a dismal place—bad air, bad water, sorrow settling over the roofs of its houses like a cloud. She felt a yoke of sadness settle onto her own bones.

“Just get the baby and go,” Xan reminded herself, as she did every year.

Over time, Xan had started making certain preparations—a blanket woven of the softest lamb’s wool to wrap the child and keep it warm, a stack of cloths to freshen a wet bottom, a bottle or two of goat’s milk to fill an empty tummy. When the goat’s milk ran out (as it invariably did—the trek was long, and milk is heavy), Xan did what any sensible witch would do: once it was dark enough to see the stars, she reached up one hand and gathered starlight in her fingers, like the silken threads of spiders’ webs, and fed it to the child. Starlight, as every witch knows, is a marvelous food for a growing infant. Starlight collection takes a certain knack and talent (magic, for starters), but children eat it with gusto. They grow fat and sated and *shining*.

It didn’t take long for the Free Cities to treat the yearly arrival of the Witch as something of a holiday. The children she brought with her, their skin and eyes bright with starlight, were seen as a blessing. Xan took her time selecting the proper family for each child, making sure their characters and inclinations and senses of humor were a good match for the little life that she had cared for over the course of such a long journey.

And the Star Children, as they were called, grew from happy infants to kind adolescents to gracious adults. They were accomplished, generous of spirit, and successful. When they died of old age, they died rich.

When Xan arrived at the grove, there was no baby to be seen, but it was still early. And she was tired. She went to one of the craggy trees and leaned against it, taking in the loamy scent of its bark through the soft beak of her nose.

“A little sleep might do me good,” she said out loud. And it was true, too. The journey she’d been on was long and taxing, and the journey she was about to begin was longer. And more taxing. Best to dig in and rest awhile. And so, as she often did when she wanted some peace and quiet away from home, the Witch Xan transformed herself into a tree—a craggy thing of leaf and lichen and deep-grooved bark, similar in shape and texture to the other ancient sycamores standing guard over the small grove. And as a tree she slept.

She didn’t hear the procession.

She didn’t hear the protestations of Antain or the embarrassed silence of the Council or the gruff pontifications of Grand Elder Gherland.

She didn’t even hear the baby when it cooed. Or when it whimpered. Or when it cried.

But when the child opened its throat into a full-fledged wail, Xan woke up with a start.

“Oh my precious stars!” she said in her craggy, barky, leafy voice, for she had not yet un-transformed. “I did not see you lying there!”

The baby was not impressed. She continued to kick and flail and howl and weep. Her face was ruddy and rageful and her tiny hands curled into fists. The birthmark on her forehead darkened dangerously.

“Just give us a second, my darling. Auntie Xan is going as fast as she is able.”

And she was. Transformation is a tricky business, even for one as skilled as Xan. Her branches began to wind back into her spine, one by one, while the folds of bark were devoured, bit by bit, by the folds of her wrinkles.

Xan leaned on her staff and rolled back her shoulders a few times to release the kinks in her neck—one side and then the other. She looked down at the child, who had quieted some, and was now staring at the Witch in the same way that she had stared at the Grand Elder—with a calm, probing, unsettling gaze. It was the sort of gaze that reached into the tight strings of the soul and plucked, like the strings of a harp. It nearly took the Witch’s breath away.

“Bottle,” Xan said, trying to ignore the harmonics ringing in her bones. “You need a bottle.” And she searched her many pockets to find a bottle of goat’s milk, ready and waiting for a hungry belly.

With a flick of her ankle, Xan allowed a mushroom to

enlarge itself enough to make a fine stool to sit upon. She let the child's warm weight rest against the soft lump of her midsection and waited. The crescent moon on the child's forehead dimmed to a pleasant shade of pink, and her dark curls framed her darker eyes. Her face shone like a jewel. She was calm and content with the milk, but her gaze still bored into Xan—like tree roots hooking into the ground. Xan grunted.

“Well,” she said. “There’s no use looking at me like that. I can’t bring you back to where you were. That’s all gone now, so you might as well forget about it. Oh hush now,” for the child began to whimper. “Don’t cry. You’ll love the place where we are going. Once I decide which city to bring you to. They are all perfectly nice. And you’ll love your new family, too. I’ll see to that.”

But just saying so made an ache in Xan’s old heart. And she was, all at once, unaccountably sad. The child pulled away from the bottle and gave Xan a curious expression. The Witch shrugged.

“Well, don’t ask me,” she said. “I have no idea why you were left in the middle of the woods. I don’t know why people do half the things they do, and I shake my head at the other half. But I am certainly not going to leave you here on the ground to feed some common stoat. You’ve got better things ahead of you, precious child.”

The word *precious* caught strangely in Xan’s throat. She couldn’t understand it. She cleared the debris from her old

lungs and gave the girl a smile. She leaned toward the baby's face and pressed her lips against the child's brow. She always gave the babies a kiss. At least, she was pretty sure she did. The child's scalp smelled like bread dough and clabbering milk. Xan closed her eyes, only for a moment, and shook her head. "Come now," she said, her voice thick. "Let's go see the world, shall we?"

And, wrapping the baby securely in a sling, Xan marched into the woods, whistling as she walked.

And she would have gone straight to the Free Cities. She certainly intended to.

But there was a waterfall that the baby would like. And there was a rocky outcropping with a particularly fine view. And she noticed herself wanting to tell the baby stories. And sing her songs. And as she told and as she sang, Xan's step grew slower and slower and slower. Xan blamed the onset of old age and the crick in her back and the fussiness of the child, but none of those things was true.

Xan found herself stopping again and again just to take yet another opportunity to unsling the baby and stare into those deep, black eyes.

Each day, Xan's path wandered farther afield. It looped, doubled back, and wiggled. Her traverse through the forest, normally almost as straight as the Road itself, was a twisty, windy mess. At night, once the goat's milk was exhausted, Xan gathered the gossamer threads of starlight on her fingers, and

the child ate gratefully. And each mouthful of starlight deepened the darkness in the child's gaze. Whole universes burned in those eyes—galaxies upon galaxies.

After the tenth night, the journey that usually only took three and a half days was less than a quarter done. The waxing moon rose earlier each night, though Xan did not pay it much mind. She reached up and gathered her starlight and didn't heed the moon.

There is magic in starlight, of course. This is well known. But because the light travels such a long distance, the magic in it is fragile and diffused, stretched into the most delicate of threads. There is enough magic in starlight to content a baby and fill its belly, and in large enough quantities, starlight can awaken the best in that baby's heart and soul and mind. It is enough to *ble*ss, but not to *en*magic.

Moonlight, however. That is a different story.

Moonlight is magic. Ask anyone you like.

Xan couldn't take her eyes off the baby's eyes. Suns and stars and meteors. The dust of nebulae. Big bangs and black holes and endless, endless Space. The moon rose, big and fat and shining.

Xan reached up. She didn't look at the sky. She didn't notice the moon.

(Did she notice how heavy the light felt on her fingers? Did she notice how sticky it was? How sweet?)

She waved her fingers above her head. She pulled her hand down when she couldn't hold it up anymore.

(Did she notice the weight of magic swinging from her wrist? She told herself she didn't. She said it over and over and over until it felt true.)

And the baby ate. And ate. And ate. And suddenly she shuddered and buckled in Xan's arms. And she cried out—once. And very loud. And then she gave a contented sigh, falling instantly asleep, pressing herself into the softness of the Witch's belly.

Xan looked up at the sky, feeling the light of the moon falling across her face. "Oh dear me," she whispered. The moon had grown full without her noticing. And powerfully magic. One sip would have done it, and the baby had had—*well*. More than one sip.

Greedy little thing.

In any case, the facts of the matter were as clear as the moon sitting brightly on the tops of the trees. The child had become *enmagicked*. There was no doubt about it. And now things were more complicated than they had been before.

Xan settled herself cross-legged on the ground and laid the sleeping child in the crook of her knee. There would be no waking her. Not for hours. Xan ran her fingers through the girl's black curls. Even now, she could feel the magic pulsing under her skin, each filament insinuating itself between cells, through tissues, filling up her bones. In time, she'd become unstable—not forever, of course. But Xan remembered enough from the magicians who raised her long ago that rearing a

magic baby is no easy matter. Her teachers were quick to tell her as much. And her Keeper, Zosimos, mentioned it endlessly. “Infusing magic into a child is akin to putting a sword in the hand of a toddler—so much power and so little sense. Can’t you see how you age me so, girl?” he had said, over and over.

And it was true. Magical children were dangerous. She certainly couldn’t leave the child with just anyone.

“Well, my love,” she said. “Aren’t you more troublesome by half?”

The baby breathed deeply through her nose. A tiny smile quivered in the center of her rosebud mouth. Xan felt her heart leap within her, and she cuddled the baby close.

“Luna,” she said. “Your name will be Luna. And I will be your grandmother. And we will be a family.”

And just by saying so, Xan knew it was true. The words hummed in the air between them, stronger than any magic.

She stood, slid the baby back into the sling, and began the long journey toward home, wondering how on earth she’d explain it to Glerk.

4.

In Which It Was Just a Dream

You ask too many questions.

No one knows what the Witch does with the children she takes. No one asks this. We can't ask it—don't you see? It hurts too much.

Fine. She eats them. Are you happy?

No. That's not what I think.

My mother told me she ate their souls, and that their soulless bodies have wandered the earth ever since. Unable to live. Unable to die. Blank-eyed and blank-faced and aimless walking. I don't think that's true. We would have seen them, don't you think? We would at least have seen one wander by. After all these years.

My grandmother told me she keeps them as slaves. That they live in the catacombs under her great castle in the forest and

operate her fell machines and stir her great cauldrons and do her bidding from morning till night. But I don't think that's true, either. Surely, if it was, at least one of them would have escaped. In all these years, surely one person would have found a way out and come home. So, no. I don't think they are enslaved.

Really, I don't think anything at all. There is nothing at all to think.

Sometimes. I have this dream. About your brother. He would be eighteen now. No. Nineteen. I have this dream that he has dark hair and luminous skin and stars in his eyes. I dream that when he smiles, it shines for miles around. Last night I dreamed that he waited next to a tree for a girl to walk by. And he called her name, and held her hand, and his heart pounded when he kissed her.

What? No. I'm not crying. Why would I cry? Silly thing. Anyway. It was just a dream.

5.

In Which a Swamp Monster Accidentally Falls in Love

Glerk did not approve, and said so the first day the baby arrived.

And he said so again, on the next day.

And the next.

And the next.

Xan refused to listen.

“Babies, babies, babies,” sang Fyrian. He was utterly delighted. The tiny dragon perched on the branch extending over the door of Xan’s tree home, opening his multicolored wings as wide as he could and arching his long neck toward the sky. His voice was loud, warbled, and atrociously off-key. Glerk covered his ears. “Babies, babies, babies, BABIES!” Fyrian contin-

ued. “Oh, how I love babies!” He had never met a baby before, at least not that he could remember, but that did not stop the dragon from loving them all to bits.

From morning till night, Fyrian sang and Xan fussed, and no one, Glerk felt, would listen to reason. By the end of the second week, their entire habitation had been transformed: diapers and baby clothes and bonnets hung on newly strung clotheslines to dry; freshly blown glass bottles dried on recently constructed racks next to a brand-new washing station; a new goat had been procured (Glerk had no idea how), and Xan had separate milk jugs for drinking and cheese making and butter churning; and, quite suddenly, the floor became thoroughly strewn with toys. More than once, Glerk’s foot had come down hard on a cruel-cornered wooden rattle, sending him howling with pain. He found himself shushed and needled out of the room, lest he wake the baby, or frighten the baby, or bore the baby to death with poetry.

By the end of the third week, he’d had quite enough.

“Xan,” he said. “I must insist that you do not fall in love with that baby.”

The old woman snorted, but she did not answer.

Glerk scowled. “Indeed. I forbid it.”

The Witch laughed out loud. The baby laughed with her. They were a mutual admiration society of two, and Glerk could not bear it.

“Luna!” Fyrian sang, flying in through the open door. He

flitted about the room like a tone-deaf songbird. “Luna, Luna, Luna, LUNA!”

“No more singing,” Glerk snapped.

“You don’t have to listen to him, Fyrian, dear,” Xan said. “Singing is good for babies. Everyone knows that.” The baby kicked and cooed. Fyrian settled on Xan’s shoulder and hummed tunelessly. An improvement, to be sure, but not much.

Glerk grunted in frustration. “Do you know what the Poet says about Witches raising children?” he asked.

“I cannot think what any poet might say about babies or Witches, but I have no doubt that it is marvelously insightful.” She looked around. “Glerk, could you please hand me that bottle?”

Xan sat cross-legged on the rough plank floor, and the baby lay in the hollow of her skirts.

Glerk moved closer, leaned his head near the baby, and gave her a skeptical expression. The baby had her fist in her mouth, leaking drool through the fingers. She waved her other hand at the monster. Her pink lips spread outward into a wide smile around her wet knuckles.

She is doing that on purpose, he thought as he tried to force his own smile away from his wide, damp jaws. *She is being adorable as some sort of hideous ruse, to spite me. What a mean baby!*

Luna gave a giggly squeal and kicked her tiny feet. Her eyes caught the swamp monster’s eyes, and they sparkled like stars.

Do not fall in love with that baby, he ordered himself. He tried to be stern.

Glerk cleared his throat.

“The *Poet*,” he said with emphasis, and narrowed his eyes on the baby, “says *nothing* about Witches and babies.”

“Well then,” Xan said, touching her nose to the baby’s nose and making her laugh. She did it again. And again. “I suppose we don’t have to worry, then. *Oh no we don’t!*” Her voice went high and singsong, and Glerk rolled his tremendous eyes.

“My dear Xan, you are missing the point.”

“And you are missing this babyhood with all your huffing and puffing. The child is here to stay, and that is that. Human babies are only tiny for an instant—their growing up is as swift as the beat of a hummingbird’s wing. Enjoy it, Glerk! Enjoy it, or get out.” She didn’t look at him when she said this, but Glerk could feel a cold prickliness emanating from the Witch’s shoulder, and it nearly broke his heart.

“Well,” Fyrian said. He was perched on Xan’s shoulder, watching the baby kick and coo with interest. “I like her.”

He wasn’t allowed to get too close. This, Xan explained, was for both of their safeties. The baby, full to bursting with magic, was a bit like a sleeping volcano—internal energy and heat and power can build over time, and erupt without warning. Xan and Glerk were both mostly immune to the volatilities of magic (Xan because of her arts and Glerk because he was older than magic and didn’t truck with its foolishness) and had

less to worry about, but Fyrian was delicate. Also, Fyrian was prone to the hiccups. And his hiccups were usually on fire.

“Don’t get too close, Fyrian, dear. Stay behind Auntie Xan.”

Fyrian hid behind the crinkly curtain of the old woman’s hair, staring at the baby with a combination of fear and jealousy and longing. “I want to *play* with her,” he whined.

“You will,” Xan said soothingly, as she positioned the baby to take her bottle. “I just want to make sure that the two of you don’t hurt one another.”

“I *never* would,” Fyrian gasped. Then he sniffed. “I think I’m allergic to the baby,” he said.

“You’re not allergic to the baby,” Glerk groaned, just as Fyrian sneezed a bright plume of fire onto the back of Xan’s head. She didn’t even flinch. With a wink of her eye, the fire transformed to steam, which lifted several spit-up stains that she had not bothered to clean yet from her shoulders .

“Bless you, dear,” Xan said. “Glerk, why don’t you take our Fyrian for a walk.”

“I dislike walks,” Glerk said, but took Fyrian anyway. Or Glerk walked, and Fyrian fluttered behind, from side to side and forward and back, like a troublesome, overlarge butterfly. Primarily, Fyrian decided to occupy himself in the collection of flowers for the baby, a process hindered by his occasional hiccups and sneezes, each with its requisite dollops of flame, and each reducing his flowers to ashes. But he hardly noticed. Instead, Fyrian was a fountain of questions.

“Will the baby grow up to be a giant like you and Xan?” he asked. “There must be more giants, then. In the wider world, I mean. The world past *here*. How I long to see the world beyond *here*, Glerk. I want to see all the giants in all the world and all the creatures who are bigger than I!”

Fyrian’s delusions continued unabated, despite Glerk’s protestations. Though he was about the same size as a dove, Fyrian continued to believe he was larger than the typical human habitation, and that he needed to be kept far away from humanity, lest he be accidentally seen and start a worldwide panic.

“When the time is right, my son,” his massive mother had told him in the moments before she plunged herself into the erupting volcano, leaving this world forever, “you will know your purpose. You are, and will be, a giant upon this fair earth. Never forget it.”

Her meaning, Fyrian felt, was clear. He was Simply Enormous. There was no doubt about it. Fyrian reminded himself of it every single day.

And for five hundred years, Glerk continued to fume.

“The child will grow as children do, I expect,” Glerk said evasively. And when Fyrian persisted, Glerk pretended to take a nap in the calla lily bog and kept his eyes closed until he actually slept.



Raising a baby—magical or not—is not without its challenges: the inconsolable crying, the near-constant runny noses, the obsession with putting very small objects into a drooling mouth.

And the *noise*.

“Can you please magic her quiet?” Fyrian had begged, once the novelty of a baby in the family had worn off. Xan refused, of course.

“Magic should never be used to influence the will of another person, Fyrian,” Xan told him over and over. “How could I do the thing that I must instruct her to *never* do, once she knows how to understand? That’s hypocrisy, is what.”

Even when Luna was content, she still was not quiet. She hummed; she gurgled; she babbled; she screeched; she guffawed; she snorted; she yelled. She was a waterfall of sound, pouring, pouring, pouring. And she never stopped. She even babbled in her sleep.

Glerk made a sling for Luna that hung from all four of his shoulders as he walked on all sixes. He took to pacing with the baby from the swamp, past the workshop, past the castle ruin, and back again, reciting poetry as he did so.

He did not intend to love the baby.

And yet.

“*From grain of sand,*” recited the monster.

“Births light
births space
births infinite time,
and to grain of sand
do all things return.”

It was one of his favorites. The baby gazed as he walked, studying his protruding eyeballs, his conical ears, his thick lips on wide jaws. She examined each wart, each divot, each slimy lump on his large, flat face, a look of wonder in her eyes. She reached up one finger and stuck it curiously into a nostril. Glerk sneezed, and the child laughed.

“Glerk,” the baby said, though it was probably a hiccup or a burp. Glerk didn’t care. She said his name. She *said* it. His heart nearly burst in his chest.

Xan, for her part, did her best not to say, *I told you so*. She mostly succeeded.



In that first year, both Xan and Glerk watched the baby for any sign of magical eruption. Though they could both see the oceans of magic thrumming just under the child’s skin (and they could feel it, too, each time they carried that girl in their arms), it remained inside her—a surging, unbroken wave.

At night, moonlight and starlight bent toward the baby, flooding her cradle. Xan covered the windows with heavy

curtains, but she would find them thrown open, and the child drinking moonlight in her sleep.

“The moon,” Xan told herself. “It is full of tricks.”

But a whisper of worry remained. The magic continued to silently surge.

In the second year, the magic inside Luna increased, nearly doubling in density and strength. Glerk could feel it. Xan could feel it, too. Still it did not erupt.

Magical babies are dangerous babies, Glerk tried to remind himself, day after day. When he wasn't cradling Luna. Or singing to Luna. Or whispering poetry into her ear as she slept. After a while, even the thrum of magic under her skin began to seem ordinary. She was an energetic child. A curious child. A naughty child. And that was enough to deal with on its own.

The moonlight continued to bend toward the baby. Xan decided to stop worrying about it.

In the third year, the magic doubled again. Xan and Glerk hardly noticed. Instead they had their hands full with a child who explored and rummaged and scribbled on books and threw eggs at the goats and once tried to fly off a fence, only to end up with two skinned knees and a chipped tooth. She climbed trees and tried to catch birds and sometimes played tricks on Fyrian, making him cry.

“Poetry will help,” Glerk said. “The study of language ennobles the rowdiest beast.”

“Science will organize that brain of hers,” Xan said. “How can a child be naughty when she is studying the stars?”

“I shall teach her math,” Fyrian said. “She will not be able to play a trick on me if she is too busy counting to one million.”

And so, Luna’s education began.

“*In every breeze exhales the promise of spring,*” Glerk whispered as Luna napped during the winter.

*“Each sleeping tree
dreams green dreams;
the barren mountain
wakes in blossom.”*

Wave after wave of magic surged silently under her skin. They did not crash to the shore. Not yet.

6.

In Which Antain Gets Himself in Trouble

During Antain's first five years as an Elder-in-Training, he did his best to convince himself that his job would one day get easier. He was wrong. It didn't.

The Elders barked orders at him during Council meetings and community functions and after-hours discussions. They berated him when they ran into him on the street. Or when they sat in his mother's dining room for yet another sumptuous (though uncomfortable) supper. They admonished him when he followed in their wake during surprise inspections.

Antain hung in the background, his eyebrows knit together into a perplexed knot.

It seemed that no matter what Antain did, the Elders erupted into purple-faced rage and sputtering incoherence.

“Antain!” the Elders barked. “Stand up straight!”

“Antain! What have you done with the proclamations?”

“Antain! Wipe that ridiculous look off your face!”

“Antain! How could you have forgotten the snacks?”

“Antain! What on earth have you spilled all over your robes?”

Antain, it seemed, could not do anything right.

His home life wasn't any better.

“How can you possibly still be an Elder-in-Training?” his mother fumed night after night at supper. Sometimes, she'd let her spoon come crashing down to the table, making the servants jump. “My brother promised me that you would be an Elder by now. He *promised*.”

And she would seethe and grumble until Antain's youngest brother, Wyn, began to cry. Antain was the oldest of six brothers—a small family, by Protectorate standards—and ever since his father died, his mother wanted nothing else but to make sure that each of her sons achieved the very best that the Protectorate had to offer.

Because didn't she, after all, *deserve* the very best, when it came to sons?

“Uncle tells me that things take time, Mother,” Antain said quietly. He pulled his toddler brother onto his lap and began

rocking until the child calmed. He pulled a wooden toy that he had carved himself from his pocket—a little crow with spiral eyes and a clever rattle inside its belly. The boy was delighted, and instantly shoved it into his mouth.

“Your uncle can boil his head,” she fumed. “We *deserve* that honor. I mean *you* deserve it, my dear son.”

Antain wasn’t so sure.

He excused himself from the table, mumbling something about having work to do for the Council, but really he only planned on sneaking into the kitchen to help the kitchen staff. And then into the gardens to help the gardeners in the last of the daylight hours. And then he went into the shed to carve wood. Antain loved woodworking—the stability of the material, the delicate beauty of the grain, the comforting smell of sawdust and oil. There were few things in his life that he loved more. He carved and worked deep into the night, trying his best not to think about his life. The next Day of Sacrifice was approaching, after all. And Antain would need yet another excuse to make himself scarce.

The next morning, Antain donned his freshly laundered robe and headed into the Council Hall well before dawn. Every day, his first task of the morning was to read through the citizen complaints and requests that had been scrawled with bits of chalk on the large slate wall, and deem which ones were worth attention and which should simply be washed down and erased.

“But what if they *all* are important, Uncle?” Antain had asked the Grand Elder once.

“They can’t possibly be. In any case, by denying access, we give our people a gift. They learn to accept their lot in life. They learn that any action is inconsequential. Their days remain, as they should be, cloudy. There is no greater gift than that. Now. Where is my Zirin tea?”

Next, Antain was to air out the room, then post the day’s agendas, then fluff the cushions for the Elders’ bony bottoms, then spray the entrance room with some kind of perfume concocted in the laboratories of the Sisters of the Star—designed, apparently, to make people feel wobbly-kneed and tongue-tied and frightened and grateful, all at once—and then he was to stand in the room as the servants arrived, giving each one an imperious expression as they entered the building, before hanging up his robes in the closet and going to school.

“But what if I don’t know how to make an imperious expression, Uncle?” the boy asked again and again.

“Practice, Nephew. Continue to practice.”

Antain walked slowly toward the schoolhouse, enjoying the temporary glimmers of sun overhead. It would be cloudy in an hour. It was always cloudy in the Protectorate. Fog clung to the city walls and cobbled streets like tenacious moss. Not many people were out and about that early in the morning. *Pity*, thought Antain. *They are missing the sunlight.* He lifted his face and felt that momentary rush of hope and promise.

He let his eyes drift toward the Tower—its black, devilishly complicated stonework mimicking the whorls of galaxies and the trajectories of stars; its small, round windows winking outward like eyes. That mother—the one who went mad—was still in there. Locked up. The madwoman. For five years now she had convalesced in confinement, but she still had not healed. In Antain’s mind’s eye, he could see that wild face, those black eyes, that birthmark on her forehead—livid and red. The way she kicked and climbed and shrieked and fought. He couldn’t forget it.

And he couldn’t forgive himself.

Antain shut his eyes tight and tried to force the image away.

Why must this go on? His heart continued to ache. *There must be another way.*

As usual, he was the first one to arrive at school. Even the teacher wasn’t there. He sat on the stoop and took out his journal. He was done with his schoolwork—not that it mattered. His teacher insisted on calling him “Elder Antain” in a breathy fawning voice, even though he wasn’t an elder yet, and gave him top marks no matter what kind of work he did. He could likely turn in blank pages and still get top marks. Antain still worked hard in spite of that. His teacher, he knew, was just hoping for special treatment later. In his journal, he had several sketches of a project of his own design—a clever cabinet to house and neatly organize garden tools, situated on wheels

so that it could be pulled easily by a small goat—a gift intended for the head gardener, who was always kind.

A shadow fell across his work.

“Nephew,” the Grand Elder said.

Antain’s head went up like a shot.

“Uncle!” he said, scrambling to his feet, accidentally dropping his papers, scattering them across the ground. He hurriedly gathered them back up into his arms. Grand Elder Gherland rolled his eyes.

“Come, Nephew,” the Grand Elder said with a swish of his robes, motioning for the boy to follow him. “You and I must talk.”

“But what about school?”

“There is no need to be in school in the first place. The purpose of this structure is to house and amuse those who have no futures until they are old enough to work for the benefit of the Protectorate. People of your stature have tutors, and why you have refused such a basic thing is beyond comprehension. Your mother prattles on about it endlessly. In any case, you will not be missed.”

This was true. He would not be missed. Every day in class, Antain sat in the back and worked quietly. He rarely asked questions. He rarely spoke. Especially now, since the one person whom he wouldn’t have minded speaking to—and even better, if she spoke back to him in return—had left school entirely. She had joined the novitiate at the Sisters of

the Star. Her name was Ethyne, and though Antain had never exchanged three words in succession with her, still he missed her desperately, and now only went to school day after day on the wild hope that she would change her mind and come back.

It had been a year. No one ever left the Sisters of the Star. It wasn't *done*. Yet, Antain continued to wait. And hope.

He followed his uncle at a run.

The other Elders still had not arrived at the Council Hall, and likely would not until noon or later. Gherland told Antain to sit.

The Grand Elder stared at Antain for a long time. Antain couldn't get the Tower out of his mind. Or the madwoman. Or the baby left in the forest, whimpering piteously as they walked away. *And oh, how that mother screamed. And oh, how she fought. And oh, what have we become?*

It pierced Antain every day, a great needle in his soul.

"Nephew," the Grand Elder said at last. He folded his hands and brought them to his mouth. He sighed deeply. Antain realized that his uncle's face was pale. "The Day of Sacrifice approaches."

"I know, Uncle," Antain said. His voice was thin. "Five days. It —" He sighed. "It waits for no one."

"You were not there last year. You were not standing with the other Elders. An infection in your foot, as I recall?"

Antain tilted his gaze to the ground. "Yes, Uncle. I had a fever, too."

“And it resolved itself the next day?”

“Bog be praised,” he said weakly. “It was a miracle.”

“And the year before,” Gherland said. “It was pneumonia, was it?”

Antain nodded. He knew where this was going.

“And before that. A fire in the shed? Is that right? Good thing no one was injured. And there you were. All by yourself. Fighting the fire.”

“Everyone else was along the route,” Antain said. “No shirkers. So I was alone.”

“Indeed.” Grand Elder Gherland gave Antain a narrowed look. “Young man,” he said. “Who on earth do you think you’re fooling?”

A silence fell between them.

Antain remembered the little black curls, framing those wide black eyes. He remembered the sounds the baby made when they left her in the forest. He remembered the thud of the Tower doors when they locked the madwoman inside. He shivered.

“Uncle—” Antain began, but Gherland waved him off.

“Listen, Nephew. It was against my better judgment to offer you this position. I did so not because of the incessant needling of my sister, but because of the great love I had, and have, for your dear father, may he rest easily. He wanted to make sure your path was assured before he passed away, and I could not deny him. And having you here”—the hard lines of

Gherland's face softened a bit—"has been an antidote to my own sadness. And I appreciate it. You are a good boy, Antain. Your father would be proud."

Antain found himself relaxing. But only for a moment. With a broad sweep of robes, the Grand Elder rose to his feet.

"But," he said, his voice reverberating strangely in the small room. "My affection for you only goes so far."

There was, in his voice, a brittle edge. His eyes were wide. Strained. Even a bit wet. *Is my uncle worried about me?* Antain wondered. *Surely not*, he thought.

"Young man," his uncle continued. "This cannot go on. The other Elders are muttering. They . . ." He paused. His voice caught in his throat. His cheeks were flushed. "They aren't happy. My protection over you extends far, my dear, dear boy. But it is not infinite."

Why would I need to be protected? Antain wondered as he stared at his uncle's strained face.

The Grand Elder closed his eyes and calmed his ragged breathing. He motioned for the boy to stand. His face resumed its imperious expression. "Come, Nephew. It's time for you to return to school. We shall expect you, as usual, at mid-afternoon. I do hope you are able to make at least one person grovel today. It would put to rest so many misgivings among the other Elders. Promise me you'll try, Antain. Please."

Antain shuffled toward the door, the Grand Elder gliding just behind. The older man lifted his hand to rest on the boy's

shoulder and let it hover just above for a moment, before thinking better of it and letting it drift back down.

“I’ll try harder, Uncle,” Antain said as he walked out the door. “I promise I will.”

“See that you do,” the Grand Elder said in a hoarse whisper.



Five days later, as the Robes swept through the town toward the cursed house, Antain was home, sick to his stomach, vomiting his lunch. Or so he said. The other Elders grumbled during the entire procession. They grumbled as they retrieved the child from its pliant parents. They grumbled as they hurried toward the sycamore grove.

“The boy will have to be dealt with,” the Elders muttered. And each one knew exactly what that meant.

Oh, Antain my boy, my boy, oh Antain my boy! Gherland thought as they walked, tendrils of worry curling around his heart, cinching into a hard, tight knot. *What have you done, you foolish child? What have you done?*

7.

In Which a Magical Child Is More Trouble by Half

When Luna was five years old, her magic had doubled itself five times, but it remained inside her, fused to her bones and muscles and blood. Indeed, it was inside every cell. Inert, unused—all potential and no force.

“It can’t go on like this,” Glerk fussed. “The more magic she gathers, the more magic will spill out.” He made funny faces at the girl in spite of himself. Luna giggled like mad. “You mark my words,” he said, vainly trying to be serious.

“You don’t know that,” Xan said. “Maybe it will never come out. Maybe things will never be difficult.”

Despite her tireless work finding homes for abandoned babies, Xan had a deep loathing for difficult things. And

sorrowful things. And unpleasant things. She preferred not to think of them, if she could help it. She sat with the girl, blowing bubbles—lovely, lurid, mostly magical things, with pretty colors swirling on their surfaces. The girl chased and caught each bubble on her fingers, and set each of them surrounding daisy blossoms or butterflies or the leaves of trees. She even climbed inside a particularly large bubble and floated just over the tips of the grass.

“There is so much beauty, Glerk,” Xan said. “How can you possibly think about anything else?”

Glerk shook his head.

“How long can this last, Xan?” Glerk said. The Witch refused to answer.

Later, he held the girl and sang her to sleep. He could feel the heft of the magic in his arms. He could feel the pulse and undulation of those great waves of magic, surging inside the child, never finding their way to shore.

The Witch told him he was imagining things.

She insisted that they focus their energies on raising a little girl who was, by nature, a tangle of mischief and motion and curiosity. Each day, Luna’s ability to break rules in new and creative ways was an astonishment to all who knew her. She tried to ride the goats, tried to roll boulders down the mountain and into the side of the barn (*for decoration*, she explained), tried to teach the chickens to fly, and once almost drowned in the swamp. (Glerk saved her. Thank goodness.) She gave ale to

the geese to see if it made them walk funny (it did) and put peppercorns in the goat's feed to see if it would make them jump (they didn't jump; they just destroyed the fence). Every day she goaded Fyrian into making atrocious choices or she played tricks on the poor dragon, making him cry. She climbed, hid, built, broke, wrote on the walls, and spoiled dresses when they had only just been finished. Her hair ratted, her nose smudged, and she left handprints wherever she went.

“What will happen when her magic comes?” Glerk asked again and again. “What will she be like then?”

Xan tried not to think about it.



Xan visited the Free Cities twice a year, once with Luna and once without. She did not explain to the child the purpose for her solo visit—nor did she tell her about the sad town on the other side of the forest, or of the babies left in that small clearing, presumably to die. She'd have to tell the girl eventually, of course. One day, Xan told herself. Not now. It was too sad. And Luna was too little to understand.

When Luna was five, she traveled once again to one of the farthest of the Free Cities—a town called Obsidian. And Xan found herself fussing at a child who would not sit quietly. Not for anything.

“Young lady, will you please remove yourself from this house at once, and go find a friend to play with?”

“Grandmama, look! It's a hat.” And she reached into the

bowl and pulled out the lump of rising bread dough and put it on her head. “It’s a hat, Grandmama! The prettiest hat.”

“It is not a hat,” Xan said. “It is a lump of dough.” She was in the middle of a complex bit of magic. The schoolmistress lay on the kitchen table, deep in sleep, and Xan kept both palms on the sides of the young woman’s face, concentrating hard. The schoolmistress had been suffering from terrible headaches that were, Xan discovered, the result of a growth in the center of her brain. Xan could remove it with magic, bit by bit, but it was tricky work. And dangerous. Work for a clever witch, and none was more clever than Xan.

Still. The work was difficult—more difficult than she felt it should have been. And taxing. Everything was taxing lately. Xan blamed old age. Her magic emptied so quickly these days. And took so long to refill. And she was so tired.

“Young man,” Xan said to the schoolmistress’s son—a nice boy, fifteen, probably, whose skin seemed to glow. One of the Star Children. “Will you please take this troublesome child outside and play with her so I may focus on healing your mother without killing her by mistake?” The boy turned pale. “I’m only kidding, of course. Your mother is safe with me.” Xan hoped that was true.

Luna slid her hand into the boy’s hand, her black eyes shining like jewels. “Let’s play,” she said, and the boy grinned back. He loved Luna, just like everyone else did. They ran, laughing, out the door and disappeared into the woods out back.

Later, when the growth had been dispatched and the brain healed and the schoolmistress was sleeping comfortably, Xan felt she could finally relax. Her eye fell on the bowl on the counter. The bowl with the rising bread dough.

But there was no bread dough in the bowl at all. Instead, there was a hat—wide-brimmed and intricately detailed. It was the prettiest hat Xan had ever seen.

“Oh dear,” Xan whispered, picking up the hat and noticing the magic laced within it. Blue. With a shimmer of silver at the edges. Luna’s magic. “Oh dear, oh dear.”

Over the next two days, Xan did her best to conclude her work in the Free Cities as quickly as she could. Luna was no help at all. She ran circles around the other children, racing and playing and jumping over fences. She dared groups of children to climb to the tops of trees with her. Or into barn lofts. Or onto the ridgepoles of neighborhood roofs. They followed her higher and higher, but they couldn’t follow her all the way. She seemed to float above the branches. She pirouetted on the tip of a birch leaf.

“Come down this instant, young lady,” the Witch hollered.

The little girl laughed. She flitted toward the ground, leaping from leaf to leaf, guiding the other children safely behind her. Xan could see the tendrils of magic fluttering behind her like ribbons. Blue and silver, silver and blue. They billowed and swelled and spiraled in the air. They left their etchings on

the ground. Xan took off after the child at a run, cleaning up as she did so.

A donkey became a toy.

A house became a bird.

A barn was suddenly made of gingerbread and spun sugar.

She has no idea what she is doing, Xan thought. The magic poured out of the girl. Xan had never seen so much in all her life. *She could so easily hurt herself*, Xan fussed. *Or someone else. Or everyone in town.* Xan tore down the road, her old bones groaning, undoing spell after spell, before she caught up to the wayward girl.

“Nap time,” the Witch said, brandishing both palms, and Luna collapsed onto the ground. She had *never* interfered in the will of another. *Never*. Years ago—almost five hundred—she made a promise to her guardian, Zosimos, that she never would. But now . . . *What have I done?* Xan asked herself. She thought she might be sick.

The other children stared. Luna snored. She left a puddle of drool on the ground.

“Is she all right?” one boy asked.

Xan picked Luna up, feeling the weight of the child’s face on her shoulder and pressing her wrinkled cheek against the little girl’s hair.

“She’s fine, dear,” she said. “She’s just sleepy. She is so sleepy. And I do believe you have chores to do.” Xan carried

Luna to the guesthouse of the mayor, where they happened to be staying.

Luna slept deeply. Her breathing was slow and even. The crescent moon birthmark on her forehead glowed a bit. A pink moon. Xan smoothed the child's black hair away from her face, winding her fingers in the shining curls.

“What have I been missing?” she asked herself out loud. There was something she wasn't seeing—something important. She didn't think about her childhood if she could help it. It was too sad. And sorrow was dangerous—though she couldn't quite remember why.

Memory was a slippery thing—slick moss on an unstable slope—and it was ever so easy to lose one's footing and fall. And anyway, five hundred years was an awful lot to remember. But now, her memories came tumbling toward her—a kindly old man, a decrepit castle, a clutch of scholars with their faces buried in books, a mournful mother dragon saying good-bye. And something else, too. Something scary. Xan tried to pluck the memories as they tumbled by, but they were like bright pebbles in an avalanche: they flashed briefly in the light, and then they were gone.

There was something she was *supposed* to remember. She was sure of it. If she could only remember what.

8.

In Which a Story Contains a Hint of Truth

A story? Fine. I will tell you a story. But you won't like it. And it will make you cry.

Once upon a time, there were good wizards and good witches, and they lived in a castle in the center of the wood.

Well, of course the forest wasn't dangerous in those days. We know who is responsible for cursing the forest. It is the same person who steals our children and poisons the water. In those days, the Protectorate was prosperous and wise. No one needed the Road to cross the forest. The forest was a friend to all. And anyone could walk to the Enchanters' Castle for remedies or advice or general gossip.

But one day, an evil Witch rode across the sky on the back of a dragon. She wore black boots and a black hat and a dress the color of blood. She howled her rage to the sky.

Yes, child. This is a true story. What other kinds of stories are there?

As she flew on her cursed dragon, the land rumbled and split. The rivers boiled and the mud bubbled and entire lakes turned into steam. The Bog—our beloved Bog—became toxic and rank, and people died because they could not get air. The land under the castle swelled—it rose and rose and rose, and great plumes of smoke and ash came billowing from its center.

“It’s the end of the world,” people cried. And it might have been, if one good man had not dared to stand up to the Witch.

One of the good wizards from the castle—no one remembers his name—saw the Witch on her fearsome dragon as they flew across the broken land. He knew what the Witch was trying to do: she wanted to pull the fire from the bulge of the earth and spread it across the land, like a cloth over a table. She wanted to cover us all in ash and fire and smoke.

Well, of course that’s what she wanted. No one knows why. How could we? She is a witch. She needs no rhyme and no reason, neither.

Of course this is a true story. Haven’t you been listening?

And so the brave little wizard—ignoring his own great peril—ran into the smoke and flame. He leaped into the air and pulled the Witch from the back of her dragon. He threw the dragon

into the flaming hole in the earth, stopping it up like a cork in a bottle.

But he didn't kill the Witch. The Witch killed him instead.

This is why it doesn't pay to be brave. Bravery makes nothing, protects nothing, results in nothing. It only makes you dead. And this is why we don't stand up to the Witch. Because even a powerful old wizard was no match for her.

I already told you this story is true. I only tell true stories. Now. Off with you, and don't let me catch you shirking on your chores. I might send you to the Witch and have her deal with you.

9.

In Which Several Things Go Wrong

The journey home was a disaster. “Grandmama!” Luna cried. “A bird!” And a tree stump became a very large, very pink, and very perplexed-looking bird, who sat sprawled on the ground, wings akimbo, as if shocked by its own existence.

Which, Xan reasoned, the poor thing probably *was*. She transformed it back into a stump the moment the child wasn’t looking. Even from that great distance, she could sense its relief.

“Grandmama!” Luna shrieked, running up ahead. “Cake!” And the stream up ahead suddenly ceased. The water vanished and became a long river of cake.

“Yummy!” Luna cried, grabbing cake by the handful, smearing multicolored icing across her face.

Xan hooked her arm around the girl’s waist, vaulted over the cake-stream with her staff, and shooed Luna forward along the winding path up the slope of the mountain, undoing the accidental spell over her shoulder.

“Grandmama! Butterflies!”

“Grandmama! A pony!”

“Grandmama! Berries!”

Spell after spell erupted from Luna’s fingers and toes, from her ears and eyes. Her magic skittered and pulsed. It was all Xan could do to keep up.

At night, after falling into an exhausted heap, Xan dreamed of Zosimos the wizard—dead now these five hundred years. In her dream, he was explaining something—something important—but his voice was obscured by the rumble of the volcano. She could only focus on his face as it wrinkled and withered in front of her eyes, his skin collapsing like the petals of a lily drooping at the end of the day.



When they arrived back at their home nestled beneath the peaks and craters of the sleeping volcano and wrapped in the lush smell of the swamp, Glerk stood at his full height, waiting for them.

“Xan,” he said, as Fyrian danced and spun in the air,

screeching a newly created song about his love for everyone that he knew. “It seems our girl has become more complicated.” He had seen the strands of magic skittering this way and that and launching in long threads over the tops of the trees. He knew even at that great distance that he wasn’t seeing Xan’s magic, which was green and soft and tenacious, the color and texture of lichen clinging to the lee of the oaks. No, this was blue and silver, silver and blue. Luna’s magic.

Xan waved him off. “You don’t know the half of it,” she said, as Luna went running to the swamp to gather the irises into her arms and drink in the scent. As Luna ran, each footstep blossomed with iridescent flowers. When she waded into the swamp, the reeds twisted themselves into a boat, and she climbed aboard, floating across the deep red of the algae coating the water. Fyrian settled himself at the prow. He didn’t seem to notice that anything was amiss.

Xan curled her arm across Glerk’s back and leaned against him. She was more tired than she’d ever been in her life.

“This is going to take some work,” she said.

Then, leaning heavily on her staff, Xan made her way to the workshop to prepare to teach Luna.

It was, as it turned out, an impossible task.

Xan had been ten years old when she was enmagicked. Until then, she had been alone and frightened. The sorcerers who studied her weren’t exactly kind. One in particular seemed to hunger for sorrow. When Zosimos rescued her and bound her

to his allegiance and care, she was so grateful that she was ready to follow any rule in the world.

Not so with Luna. She was only five. And remarkably bull-headed. “Sit still, precious,” Xan said over and over and over as she tried to get the girl to direct her magic at a single candle. “We need to look inside the flame in order to understand the—*Young lady. No flying in the classroom.*”

“I am a crow, Grandmama,” Luna cried. Which wasn’t entirely true. She had simply grown black wings and proceeded to flap about the room. “Caw, caw, caw!” she cried.

Xan snatched the child out of the air and undid the transformation. Such a simple spell, but it knocked Xan to her knees. Her hands shook and her vision clouded over.

What is happening to me? Xan asked herself. She had no idea.

Luna didn’t notice. She transformed a book into a dove and enlivened her pencils and quills so that they stood on their own and performed a complicated dance on the desk.

“Luna, *stop*,” Xan said, putting a simple blocking spell on the girl. Which should have been easy. And should have lasted at least an hour or two. But the spell ripped from Xan’s belly, making her gasp, and then didn’t even work. Luna broke through the block without a second thought. Xan collapsed onto a chair.

“Go outside and play, darling,” the old woman said, her body shaking all over. “But don’t touch anything, and don’t hurt anything, and *no magic.*”

“What’s magic, Grandmama?” Luna asked as she raced out the door. There were trees to climb and boats to build. And Xan was fairly certain she saw the child talking to a crane.

Each day, the magic became more unruly. Luna bumped tables with her elbows and accidentally transformed them to water. She transformed her bedclothes to swans while she slept (they made an awful mess). She made stones pop like bubbles. Her skin became so hot it gave Xan blisters, or so cold that she made a frostbitten imprint of her body on Glerk’s chest when she gave him a hug. And once she made one of Fyrian’s wings disappear in mid-flight, causing him to fall. Luna skipped away, utterly unaware of what she had done.

Xan tried encasing Luna in a protective bubble, telling her it was a fun game they were playing, just to keep all that surging power contained. She cast bubbles around Fyrian, and bubbles around the goats and bubbles around each chicken and a very large bubble around the house, lest she accidentally allow their home to burst into flames. And the bubbles held—they were strongly magic, after all—until they didn’t.

“Make more, Grandmama!” Luna cried, running in circles on the stones, each of her footprints erupting in green plants and lurid flowers. “More bubbles!”

Xan had never been so exhausted in her life.

“Take Fyrian to the south crater,” Xan told Glerk, after a

week of backbreaking labor and little sleep. She had dark circles under her eyes. Her skin was as pale as paper.

Glerk shook his massive head. "I can't leave you like this, Xan," he said as Luna made a cricket grow to the size of a goat. She gave it a lump of sugar that had appeared in her hand and climbed aboard its back for a ride. Glerk shook his head. "How could I possibly?"

"I need to keep the both of you safe," Xan said.

The swamp monster shrugged. "Magic has nothing on me," he said. "I've been around for far longer than it has."

Xan wrinkled her brow. "Perhaps. But I don't know. She has . . . *so much*. And she has no idea what she's doing." Her bones felt thin and brittle, and her breath rattled in her chest. She did her best to hide this from Glerk.



Xan followed Luna from place to place, undoing spell after spell. The wings were removed from the goats. The eggs were untransformed from muffins. The tree house stopped floating. Luna was both amazed and delighted. She spent her days laughing and sighing and pointing with wonder. She danced about, and where she danced, fountains erupted from the ground.

Meanwhile, Xan grew weaker and weaker.

Finally Glerk couldn't stand it anymore. Leaving Fyrian at the crater's edge, he galumphed down to his beloved swamp.

After a quick dip in the murky waters, he made his way toward Luna, who was standing by herself in the yard.

“Glerk!” she called. “I’m so happy to see you! You are as cute as a bunny.”

And, just like that, Glerk was a bunny. A fluffy, white, pink-eyed bunny with a puff for a tail. He had long white lashes and fluted ears, and his nose quivered in the center of his face.

Instantly, Luna began to cry.

Xan came running out of the house and tried to make out what the sobbing girl had told her. By the time she began to look for Glerk, he was gone. He had hopped away, having no idea who he was, or what he was. He had been enrabbited. It took hours to find him.

Xan sat the girl down. Luna stared at her.

“Grandmama, you look different.”

And it was true. Her hands were gnarled and spotted. Her skin hung on her arms. She could feel her face folding over itself and growing older by the moment. And in that moment, sitting in the sun with Luna and the rabbit-that-once-was-Glerk shivering between them, Xan could feel it—the magic in her bending toward Luna, just as the moonlight had bent toward the girl when she was still a baby. And as the magic flowed from Xan to Luna, the old woman grew older and older and older.

“Luna,” Xan said, stroking the ears of the bunny, “do you know who this is?”

“It’s Glerk,” Luna said, pulling the rabbit onto her lap and cuddling it affectionately.

Xan nodded. “How do you know it is Glerk?”

Luna shrugged. “I saw Glerk. And then he was a bunny.”

“Ah,” Xan said. “Why do you think he became a bunny?”

Luna smiled. “Because bunnies are wonderful. And he wanted to make me happy. Clever Glerk!”

Xan paused. “But *how*, Luna? How did he become a bunny?” She held her breath. The day was warm, and the air was wet and sweet. The only sounds were the gentle gurgling of the swamp. The birds in the forest quieted down, as if to listen.

Luna frowned. “I don’t know. He just did.”

Xan folded her knotty hands together and pressed them to her mouth. “I see,” she said. She focused on the magic stores deep within her body, and noticed sadly how depleted they were. She could fill them up, of course, with both starlight and moonlight, and any other magic that she could find lying around, but something told her it would only be a temporary solution.

She looked at Luna, and pressed her lips to the child’s forehead. “Sleep, my darling. Your grandmama needs to learn some things. Sleep, sleep, *sleep, sleep, sleep.*”

And the girl slept. Xan nearly collapsed from the effort of it. But there wasn’t time for that. She turned her attention to Glerk, analyzing the structure of the spell that had enrabbited him, undoing it bit by bit.

“Why do I want a carrot?” Glerk asked. The Witch explained the situation. Glerk was not amused.

“Don’t even start with me,” Xan snapped.

“There’s nothing to say,” Glerk said. “We both love her. She is family. But what now?”

Xan pulled herself to her feet, her joints creaking and cracking like rusty gears.

“I hate to do this, but it’s for all our sakes. She is a danger to herself. She is a danger to all of us. She has *no idea* what she’s doing, and I don’t know how to teach her. Not now. Not when she’s so young and impulsive and . . . *Luna-ish*.”

Xan stood, rolled her shoulders, and braced herself. She made a bubble and hardened the bubble into a cocoon around the girl—adding bright threads winding around and around.

“She can’t breathe!” Glerk said, suddenly alarmed.

“She doesn’t need to,” Xan said. “She is in stasis. And the cocoon holds her magic inside.” She closed her eyes. “Zosimos used to do this. To me. When I was a child. Probably for the same reason.”

Glerk’s face clouded over. He sat heavily on the ground, curling his thick tail around him like a cushion. “I remember. All at once.” He shook his head. “Why had I forgotten?”

Xan pushed her wrinkled lips to one side. “Sorrow is dangerous. Or, at least, it was. I can’t remember why, now. I think we both became accustomed to not remembering things. We just let things get . . . foggy.”

Glerk guessed it was something more than that, but he let the matter drop.

“Fyrian will be coming down after a bit, I expect,” Xan said. “He can’t stand being alone for too long. I don’t think it matters, but don’t let him touch Luna, just in case.”

Glerk reached out and laid his great hand on Xan’s shoulder. “But where are *you* going?”

“To the old castle,” Xan said.

“But . . .” Glerk stared at her. “There’s nothing there. Just a few old stones.”

“I know,” Xan said. “I just need to stand there. In that place. Where I last saw Zosimos, and Fyrian’s mother, and the rest of them. I need to remember things. Even if it makes me sad.”

Leaning heavily on her staff, Xan began hobbling away.

“I need to remember a lot of things,” she muttered to herself. “Everything. Right now.”

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