

Wayward Stranger

A Slooswell Witches Fantasy

Book Three

by

Melody Klink

WAYWARD STRANGER
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One

The shadow being loomed over me, over the entirety of the woods. Wesley's voice was a blip, an insignificant wave in a torrent of howls and whispers. *How did it know me? What did it want?*

None of these questions mattered, as my lungs threatened to be crushed under the weight of whatever *it* was.

And then, another voice joined the cacophony. One that seemed to battle the creature, its voice a song in the dissonance.

Marlowe!

I snapped from my pain-inducing reverie, realizing that Marlowe was in the dark of it with us. Between Wesley's brandished shield of magic, and her stream of words, the shadow being shrunk back, not small by any means, but enough for me to come to my senses.

"Run!"

I couldn't tell you which one said it, but I did. I ran and ran and ran. Far beyond the edge of the woods, far across the land that took me there.

I was by the edge of the westbound interstate by the time I stopped, chest heaving, stars clouding my vision. "Marlowe? Wesley?!" I shouted, gasping for air. I could scarcely hear footsteps behind me.

"*I will always be watching,*" a voice called directly into the exhausted dark of my mind, "*I will always be waiting.*"

And then, as if every stray cloud suddenly left the sky, so too did my vision and thoughts clear. I was dizzy, on the verge of being sick.

Vera was waiting for me, her immaculate cream-colored sedan pulled to the shoulder of the interstate with its flashers beaming through my haze. "Get in!"

I hustled toward the back passenger door, frantically pulling at the door handle as she unlocked it.

"The hell was *that?!?*" I hollered, the sound reverberating in the small space. "What the hell was that?!"

Vera looked at me, through me, consternation playing at her features. "What did you bring here?"

I blinked slowly, the stars still dissipating from my vision. "Excuse me?"

"I have lived my entire life in Slooswell. All my years in this town, I have never encountered such a thing. It must have come with you. *Because of you.*"

I replayed every word the creature said, though at half speed and some of it garbled, even now. I hated the implication of her scathing words; it's not like I meant to bring anything with me. That was the whole damn point of coming here. "I don't freaking know!"

She stiffened. "Well you better figure it out."

Wesley and Marlowe both were rushing toward the car now, hurriedly climbing in and slamming the doors shut. I wrapped an arm around Wesley, who was beside me in the backseat, and the other hand found purchase on Marlowe's shoulder through the small gap leading to the front. "Thank you," I heaved, "thank you."

"I'll have to find my truck at some point," Wesley breathed heavily through his words, looking all around. "Where did we come out?"

"The other side of Slooswell," Vera replied coldly, "the periphery." She eyed the trees as if waiting for something.

We all sat in the silence, uneasy at the foreboding feeling emanating from beyond the concrete dividers of the interstate.

* * * * *

Behind the closed and locked doors of the Tender's Rest, I began stripping out of my costume. Twigs stuck in— and to— every possible surface. Outside my door, I could hear Vera and the others speaking heatedly. I didn't love being the topic of an argument; once I heard Vera spit my name, I sunk down against the bedside. I didn't want this. I didn't *do* this. I don't even know what the hell *this* is.

Wesley and Marlowe's voices both got louder. I slid into a dress and a cardigan, and padded out barefoot. As I rounded down the stairs, the arguing snapped to silence. Vera glared at me icily. I returned her stare, frustrated and exhausted.

"You better not tear up this town, girl," she said, with such excruciating animosity that her words alone could have killed me.

"I was trying to save it," I replied plainly, thrusting my hands forward. "That's why we went there in the first place— to figure it out in case it was bad."

"*In case it was bad*. You sound like a child," she seethed, "you knew it was bad! You called all of us!"

"I didn't know what it was," I roared back. My patience was wearing thin, knowing that Vera was sliding back into her old territory about *outsiders*. "But I *will* handle it. You told me yourself that the White Deer brought me here for a reason."

“I didn’t say it was a good reason,” she observed with malice. She snapped on her heels, and strode toward the front door of the Rest.

“For what it’s worth, Vera? I’m grateful that you came.” I called.

She did not look back.

“That went down like a lead balloon,” I slouched against the bannister.

Marlowe huffed, distractedly brushing her fingers through messy jet hair, eyes still on the front door. “Some people act as if everything goes perfectly all the time, and that nothing is ever out of place. Some people never have to worry about whether things go their way— how convenient it must be to be perfect.” She scoffed. “Small town mentality.”

I winced. She was right, unfortunately, in the sense that Vera would blame me for literally anything that ever went wrong in this town again. Which wasn’t fair— Slooswell could come up with a chaos all its own, no Gardner blood required. I shook the thoughts away. “Thank you both again for coming to the rescue,” I smiled wearily. Wesley sat on the bottom step, and wrapped one arm around my leg. “I’d be so lost without you two.”

Marlowe smiled at this, coming in for a hug. “Tessa, my dear, we must always save the people worth saving. The ties of found sisterhood can be strongest of all.”

“Oh! Where’s Vera?” A voice asked from behind us all. Missy strode out, four steaming mugs in hand. “I brought some tea, terrible situation it sounds like. Sorry I couldn’t assist.”

I frowned, pointing to the door.

* * * * *

“Don’t you worry about her,” Missy cooed at me, sipping the fourth drink herself, “she works herself up in a tizzy, has some sensible yet dramatic blowout, then meanders back around like some kind of hopeful, aloof cat. She can’t predict what happens next any better than the rest of us.”

The tea was a wonderfully flavored mixture, pomegranate and hibiscus and some warm herbal note beneath it all. I inhaled the steam, letting it seep into my bones, my thoughts wandering over everything that had happened. I had used my powers to escape the Folk, but not the creature in The Woods. Why? Would they have worked? Could I have repelled the being alone? It felt like ice had lodged itself in my heart. It would all come to a head, sooner or later.

Too many things were giving chase, and I was starting to lose my balance in running.

“You sure you’re good?” Wesley was at my side still, looking up at me as he asked the question. “You can always come to my place.”

I nodded. “I’ve got Lumori to take care of, and things to make sure are in place here.”

His eyes lingered on me, the warmth of them making me quiver. “Okay. Just call if you need me.” He stood, planting a lingering kiss against my lips as he passed. “G’night, everyone.”

A chorus of goodnights passed, and not long after, it was just Missy and I left.

“You’re a kind girl, Tessa Jones,” Missy said suddenly, her eyes paring me down to an honest core, “don’t ever let some grumpy old crone change you.”

I half-heartedly smiled, giving her a hug. “Thanks for the tea.”

* * * * *

The Wisteria Room felt too small for all the things I needed to think about. The walls were closing in, suffocating, as if the very air was soaked with the weight of the decision I was trying to make. I sat on the edge of the bed, my fingers absently tracing the edge of the old journal in front of me, its pages crinkled and half-filled.

I hadn’t written a single word yet, but I could already feel the heft of the letter that needed to be written.

I was supposed to be at peace in a place like this, tucked away in some cozy B&B on the edge of a town where no one would think to look for me. But I felt like a fugitive, a shadow lurking in a place I didn’t belong. And no matter how many times I tried to breathe through it, I couldn’t stop feeling the gnawing anxiety clawing at the back of my throat.

I picked up the pen, the tip hovering over the blank page. It was a dangerous idea, writing to them. To my mother, who had always been my rock, my safe place in any storm. The one who would wrap me up in her warmth, kiss away my fears, and tell me everything would be alright. Or to my grandmother— sharp and steadfast, with wisdom that went deeper than any spell or incantation. They were both witches of great power, both had always been there for me. They loved me.

But, in addition to *everything else*, the Fae were actively hunting me. I had felt them— their cold, predatory presence, their whispers just out of reach. I couldn’t risk dragging them into this. If I called on either of them, I might as well be signing their lives away.

But they were strong, too, and they would know how to help me.

The sound of a soft snicker snapped me out of my thoughts, and I looked down at the familiar curled at my feet. Lumori, my chaotic little mess, was fiddling with the collar around his neck. His form flickered between a swirling mass of sparks and smoke, his tiny, barely-visible eyes gleaming. A sort of *murrrumph?* noise came from somewhere inside him.

“I don’t think I have a choice,” I murmured, not bothering to look up.

He bounded closer, his ethereal body dissipating before reforming at my side.

I let out a soft sigh, the heaviness of the situation threatening to swallow me whole. “I didn’t ask to be hunted, to be chased through worlds that weren’t mine. I just wanted to right a wrong.”

“You don’t get to pick your fate, Tressa. But you get to choose how you face it.”

My vision snapped to Lumori, his smoky form flickering again as he sat on the edge of the desk, his collar almost glowing in the dim light, head tilted slightly to one side.

That voice, a mimicry of a memory. *Had he just channeled one of my own thoughts...?*

“Did— did you just—”

Lumori’s shape shifted slightly, the wind around him picking up for a moment. *“You write the damn letter. You ask for help. And if they’re foolish enough to come for you, then we fight. That’s what we do. We fight.”*

My grandmother’s voice poured from him, all edges and ferocity and power. That one was *not* a memory, but a perfect imitation, a thought given shape in someone else’s vocals.

But something in me, something buried deep under the layers of fear and doubt, stirred at the idea. Maybe, just maybe, he was right. Er, maybe Gramma was right? Either way, I was running out of time, and I couldn’t fight this alone. And it was okay to need help.

I looked down at the journal again, absently running my fingers over the worn leather cover. The thought of reaching out to my mother, of seeing her soothing words on the other end of the letter, brought a small warmth to my chest. I could picture her now— sitting in her garden, the sunlight catching strands of her strawberry blonde hair, a smile that always made me feel like everything would be okay. She would want to help. She always wanted to help.

I took a shaky breath and finally lowered the pen to the page. My hand trembled as I began to write, the words spilling out as if they had been waiting for this moment, this choice.

Dear Mama, I wrote, my heart heavy with the weight of the words. *I need you.*

* * * * *

I stared at the letter for what felt like hours, the words I'd written etched on the page, a confession, a plea. *I need you.* My hand hovered over the letter for a long moment, the desire to reach out to them, to beg for help, warring with the gnawing fear that sending it would lead to disaster. I leaned back, my breath coming in shaky gasps. I couldn't send it.

My fingers were numb from the sheer damming of my magic. I closed my eyes as a tightness settled deep in my chest.

Turning to a fresh page, I stared down at the notebook, pen lingering just above its surface, carefully running through any and every word I could use to get my point across. Then, the answer finally occurred to me: I would just write the address to the Tender's Rest, leaving the rest of the page blank save a tiny tendril of my natural magic. "Find me," I begged, willing my imprint onto the paper, "please."

* * * * *

I pressed the letter down, smoothing the edges with my fingers as if trying to erase my hesitation. I folded it in half carefully, then slid it into an envelope— plain, unassuming, and utterly without a hint of the desperate plea it contained within.

This was better, I told myself. This was safer. The Fae weren't stupid, but they wouldn't know the full extent of my need unless I gave it to them. I took a deep breath and stood up, carefully placing the envelope on the desk. It was a step closer to the safety I needed, a thread of hope to cling to in the chaos.

But no matter how I tried to tell myself that I'd done the right thing, my heart clenched painfully in my chest. I wasn't sure how much longer I could keep this up.

Two

The days leading to Halloween were quieter than I hoped for, which sounded strange compared to my usual, desperate plea for normalcy. I had delivered the letter directly to the post office, and surely it had reached its destination by now. Even so, would they understand the message? I hadn't signed it. I would just have to trust my magic to find a way.

Still, that didn't stop my thoughts from racing.

Marlowe's Halloween get-together was gearing up, and would be followed by a party at the Rest. I was prepared for neither, given the state of my nerves, but I had resolved to show up for both.

* * * * *

The air in Marlowe's studio apartment was thick with the scent of dried flowers and incense, a haze that curled in the corners of the ceiling like errant shadows. It was dark, yet warm, the kind of cozy where the night felt like it had wrapped itself around you, making everything inside seem alive with whispers.

I stood near the edge of the room, a glass of something spiced in hand, watching Wesley chat and laugh with a few of the others. His smile was warm, making the atmosphere feel just a little bit brighter, and in the midst of the flickering candlelight and the low hum of conversation, it almost felt *normal*.

The tables were cluttered with tarot cards, crystal balls, and half-burnt candles. A small group gathered around a seance table, their heads bent in quiet concentration. There was a softness to everything here— the old records on the turntable, the quiet trickling sound of water from the tiny indoor fountain in the kitchen, the way the walls were lined with shelves of old books, jars filled with strange things, and the faint glimmer of protective charms hanging from every corner. This was a veritable sanctuary, and felt like a place between worlds, a place where history and mystery were one and the same.

I sipped my drink, the pomegranate punch of it sharp against the edge of my senses, and glanced around again. The others were drifting through the evening, picking up on the various threads that connected us all: a tarot reading here, a few laughs over misreads there, a quiet conversation over which spirits had decided to join us for the evening.

But, for all the laughter and the enjoyment, my mind kept straying back to the feeling that had been gnawing at me all night; that vague, unshakable sense of *something* being off, like I was standing in the middle of a dream I couldn't quite wake up from.

Maybe it was just the weight of the previous days— the lingering scent of the creature, the pull tugging at the back of my mind. It was also the *waiting*, hoping that someone in my family would understand my message and swing to the rescue. Somehow.

Besides, on All Hallow's Eve, it wasn't uncommon for me to feel a little... liminal, given the thinness of the veil between worlds. Especially in spaces like this, where life and magical energy were in full swing... yet I was suppressing all that magic, and it compounded tenfold.

A laugh broke me from my thoughts. I looked over and found Wesley by the window, talking to a costumed fiery witch who had just come in. He was grounded and personable, always the opposite of my quiet restlessness. One of the many things I loved about him.

I couldn't help but smile.

I tore my gaze away from him, feeling a tug at the edges of my awareness— something lingering in the dark. I rubbed my wrist absentmindedly. Marlowe had been busy, flitting between groups of "witches" and Witches alike, but her presence was everywhere, a delicate intensity that filled the place to the brim. She came over to me, her steps nearly silent on the old wooden floor. I could feel her before I saw her, the pull of her aura tugging at mine like two magnets.

"You look like you're somewhere else," she said softly, her voice a murmur over the music in the background.

I shook my head, trying to brush it off. "It's nothing. Just... just a feeling. I'll shake it off."

Her eyes flicked toward Wesley, then back to me. "Are you sure? Given the things we've encountered recently..."

"I'm sure." I forced the words out, trying not to let the doubt in my voice seep through.

Marlowe studied me for a moment before nodding slowly. "Well, I am here for you. Always. A snap of the fingers will have this place emptied, should you need it. Now, a tempt of fate for you?" She held gilded tarot cards forward, their edges shining in the low light.

I smiled meekly, and pulled one.

The Tower.

The night, once filled with laughter and light, suddenly felt like *too much*. And the air, thick with magic, seemed to pulse with something *hungry* and *waiting* just beneath the surface. I felt the shift in a visceral way, the space between the living and the dead thinned to a razor's edge.

"Hmm," Marlowe hummed, "you fear change. You fear destruction. So, brick by brick, you resolve to keep yourself safe, shutting everything out, all while building a tower that cannot continue to stand. It will fall, Tessa, and you will have to face that." She planted a kiss on the card, her blood red print covering half of the art, and handed it back to me. "Let those you love help you in the wreckage, in the fallout."

She turned, gliding away towards another group. I tucked the card into my shift, fidgeting with errant strands of hair. I might have been dressed up as a peasant-girl-turned-vampire, but I felt exactly zero percent enthused.

"Hey," Wesley's voice was so close to me, I jumped.

"Hey."

He rubbed along my arm, avoiding the tattered cuts of fabric. "Everything all right?"

Before I could respond, a loud *bang* echoed from the direction of the seance table. Everyone turned, startled. My heart skipped. The table had cracked, the wood splitting down the middle as if something unseen had forced it apart. The room fell silent.

Wesley stepped up beside me, his face pale. "What the hell was that?"

The crack in the table began to glow, a faint purple light spilling out from the edges.

I turned to Wesley, then Marlowe, my throat tight. "We need to figure out what's going on. Now." I snatched the closest candelabra from the mantle, brandishing it like a weapon, spilling melted candle wax in an arc ahead of me. My eyes frantically scanned the room.

Marlowe's voice was far away as she spoke the words, her face lit only by the candle she now carried.

"This night, the veil is thin; ghoulish reverie awaits.

Do not tarry, my dears, else you'll meet a ghoulish fate!"

She turned to me, her blood red lips pulled into a grin. "Everyone, prepare to take your leave," Marlowe shouted over the spooked crowd, "the Tender's Rest awaits!"

I stared, confused, chest heaving.

"A little magic trick to commemorate your Halloween festivities," she hollered and flourished a bow, her long, silken sleeves swooshing through the air. "Merry Hallow's Eve to all, and to all a good fright!"

Everyone began clapping, shouting their surprise.

You'd have thought someone took a sledgehammer to my nerves. I felt scattered and a little exhausted. "Great trick," I commended her, trying to hide the heaviness behind my eyes.

* * * * *

The night was thick with storm clouds and something else— something *other*— as we shuffled toward the front porch of the Tender's Rest. The Halloween party at the B&B was a major event of the year for the locals; of course, anything Robert touched turned to gold, and as such, the party was expected to be a blowout. The old house had been transformed into a haunted mansion, complete with cobwebs, flickering candles, and the occasional shriek or howl from far-off closed doors. There were costumes galore: witches, vampires, ghosts, and even a few things I couldn't quite place. A veritable crowd was here, mingling with an almost magical ease— Mart and his wife, both in matching bat costumes, the mechanic I'd only met a handful of times was Frankenstein's monster, and Wesley, who had settled for a simple vampire look. No complaints from me; he looked good in black.

I stepped inside, shedding the cold autumn air with a sigh of relief. The low hum of music filled the space, a mix of eerie melodies and upbeat tracks. The clinking of glasses, soft laughter, and the faintest trace of a lingering spell dusted the room. I made my way over to the food table first. There were pumpkin pastries, candy apples, and an array of things that were, frankly, far too cute to eat. It was the sort of spread that screamed "town-wide effort," with everyone contributing something.

Wesley found me after a few minutes, offering me a glass of something dark and frothy with a mischievous grin.

"Here's to a Halloween with no major incidents," he said, the corners of his mouth twitching around his faux fangs. "Fingers crossed."

"I'll drink to that," I said, taking the glass. His charm always had a way of settling my nerves, but tonight, any chance of relaxation had already eeked away from me. The lingering energy from the seance trick still buzzed under my skin. Moonlight was just starting to glint through the windows as he planted a kiss on my cheek, just before walking away.

"Duty calls," he shouted as he turned, "all right, kids, who's ready for a spooky tale?"

The shrieks from every direction made me smile, watching everyone crowd around him, eager and waiting. Wesley had a talent for storytelling— his deep voice carrying a weight that made even the most ordinary ghost story sound thrilling.

“It was a stormy night, much like this one,” Wesley began, leaning in with his trademark intensity. “The old man, desperate for riches, made a pact with the devil himself—”

A loud bang interrupted him, so sudden and harsh that the room fell silent for a beat. The door, old wood and hinges creaking, rattled again. I felt my pulse quicken, but the rest of the crowd seemed to think it was just part of the show. They laughed nervously, glances flicking all around.

Wesley paused, eyes narrowing. “You’re telling me we’re getting new guests already?” he asked, half-smirking. “I guess the devil’s looking for a seat at this party.”

I could feel the prickle of something familiar at the edges of my senses, the tug of old magic. The kind I’d known my entire life.

Before I could even stand, the door flew open with a *snap*.

And there she was.

Gramma Betta Nyrine Gardner, in her old-fashioned shift dress, dirty boots, and a dark purple cloak that billowed behind her like something from a forgotten era. The energy shifted when she stepped inside, an aura of ancient, unshakable power clinging to her presence like smoke.

Her eyes, emerald and intense as ever, snapped to me almost instantly, ignoring every other body in the room. A small smirk pulled at the corner of her mouth.

“You’ve been busy,” she said, her voice curled.

I swallowed, the room falling quiet in that strange way that only happens *when someone like my grandmother enters a space*. Wesley stood up, offering her a polite smile, though there was a flicker of wariness in his eyes. “Can we help you, ma’am?”

She glanced at him, a slight simper forming at her lips. “I’m here for my granddaughter. Not for you, young man.”

The atmosphere in the room shifted. There was a subtle hum now, like a distant drumbeat echoing in my bones, as though the walls themselves couldn’t contain the power Gramma carried with her.

I barely heard Wesley’s voice over the roar of blood in my ears. “Then you— how?”

I didn’t get the chance to answer before Gramma cut in.

“I come when called.” Her gaze shifted back to me, narrowing. “Tressa Rae, we’ve got some talkin’ to do.”

I could hear whispers from all around the room. *Tressa? Who’s Tressa?*

Oh no.

Three

I could feel my pulse pounding in my temples as I led Gramma up the creaking stairs to my room. The guests below, still buzzing from the surprise entrance, had returned to their conversations, but there was a nervous energy in the air. The night was changing, and everyone in the house knew it.

Gramma's boot heels clicked sharply on the wooden steps behind me. I could almost hear the unspoken judgment in her silence, the way she took in every detail of the house, as if measuring it against some unseen scale.

I pushed open the door to my room and stepped inside, the familiar, comforting chaos of my space greeting me. The room was dim, lit only by the flickering moonlight of the nearby window.

And of course, Lumori was waiting in the corner.

He slithered out of the shadows like a living smoke cloud, its tendrils of shifting darkness trailing like ink in water. His form flickered— now a swirling mass of static, now a shape vaguely *mammalian*, now simply a void. Made of no real substance, only energy, the embodiment of wild, dark magic.

At his presence, Gramma let out a sharp laugh. She stepped forward, eyes gleaming with something almost amused, almost *impressed*.

"Well, well," she said, her voice heavy with that familiar tone of knowing. "So you've made a friend. Not the kind I would have expected, but then again, you were always a wild one, weren't you?" She laughed, a slight cackle. "Most witches get cats."

The elemental hissed, a low rumble like static building to a crackle. She leaned down, letting the smoke curl around her knotted knuckles.

"That's a long story," I sighed and squeezed my arms close to my chest, watching her as she examined the elemental's shifting form with genuine curiosity. "You got my letter."

Gramma's eyes flicked back to me, the playful edge of her smile disappearing. There was something sharper now, something that cut through the rest of the night's veneer of festivity. "I did, and you're lucky I could suss out the magic," she said, voice low and serious. "It was so *small*. I'm here because something's coming, aren't I? And don't you dare tell me nothin's wrong." She looked at me, a glint of sharp knowing in her eyes. "You can hide it all you want, but I've been around long enough to recognize when things are off."

I stared at her, fingers digging into the edge of the dresser next to me. My gut twisted. She was right, of course.

"There's a lot," I said, my voice growing more and more unsteady.

Gramma arched an eyebrow, her gaze never leaving mine. "Don't give me that oversimplification. You're a death witch, girl. I taught you better than that. This—" She gestured vaguely at the elemental, which was swirling in a particularly agitated way—"isn't what's causing the problem, is it?"

I clenched my jaw. "Lumori's fine. But there's something out there, yes. In The Woods."

Her expression hardened. "That's why you look like you're about to be sick, huh?" Her voice was deceptively soft, a knife edge just before the plunge. "Something's happenin', then. Somethin' bigger than anything you've ever dealt with."

I felt a jolt, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. Lumori let out a low, echoing hum, sensing the shift in my energy. I swallowed hard, my heart hammering in my chest.

Gramma tilted her head, watching me like a hawk, waiting.

"I'm trying to handle it," I finally said, the words coming out in a strained whisper.

Gramma's laugh was short, humorless. "That's the problem with you, girl. You think you can handle everything on your own. But the truth is, you can't. I need you to tell me everything— not just the easy bits." Her eyes softened for the briefest of moments, a flicker of something older and kinder beneath the steel resolve. "You don't have to be alone in this. Hell, you never were."

I turned away, unwilling to yield to the sudden knot in my throat. Lumori swirled nervously around me, his form flickering and warping as if it could sense the tension. Then it all spilled forth from me— the Sun Folk, the running, the fear. The Moon Folk, too. The frustration and exhaustion, the desperate desire to just be fucking *normal* for once.

"I was trying to save all of us. I didn't *want* this," I said softly, more to myself than to her. "None of it."

Gramma's footsteps echoed through the room as she stepped toward the door. "No one does. But you've got more strength in you than you give yourself credit for. And you've got me. We'll figure it out. Together. Now, show me to whatever this wonderful food smell is. I've got one hell of a hankerin' after that trip."

* * * * *

Gramma's presence was a salve— albeit, a spiky one— to my nerves. I knew she could handle anything in the whole wide world, and she'd help me handle this; she could do it without the Slip, too, with all the knowledge she held within. I wondered, though, if she had spoken to mom at all, or if mom even knew about the letter; I hadn't expected Gramma showing up, especially alone. She was happily chattering with Missy, layering compliment after compliment on the cooking that filled the parlor. Missy beamed, filling the room with a warmth that even the fireplace couldn't contend with.

The smell of roasted marshmallows filled the air as I settled into a metal folding chair near the hearth, cradling a mug of warm cider between my hands. The party had spilled out into every room, laughter and chatter bouncing off the walls.

"Want a plate?" Missy, hostess supreme, was already sliding a platter of food my way. She had a knack for keeping everyone fed, and tonight, she'd outdone herself. Spatchcocked chickens lined the length of the biggest console table, while a dish of mashed potatoes swimming in garlic butter sat nearby, golden and decadent. Missy had also made her famous caramelized onion bread, the crust so crisp it practically begged to be torn into. And in the center of it all— marshmallow brownie pie. The kind with a flaky crust that crumbled in all the right places, topped with a swirl of whipped cream.

"Missy," I said gently, "it's a Halloween party. You don't have to wait on us! Or feed us so decadently."

"Oh tosh," she countered with a wave, "that's my gift to you all tonight. This is what I live for!"

I didn't reach for my fork, though. I was still waiting for the jitters of the night to settle into something more manageable. But as I glanced over at the table, I noticed Gramma sitting at the far end, deep in conversation with Wesley. His calloused hands were cradling a glass of wine as they spoke in low murmurs, but even from across the room, I could see the soft smile on his lips. Gramma smiled in return— he had that effect on people.

It was comforting. Gramma never hesitated about anything; she'd tackle this with every bit of ferocity.

Beside her sat Marlowe, who I hoped would give a good impression; she was powerful, able to conjure a poem from a shadow, an incantation from the hum of the earth. She was vital to my life here in Slooswell. Marlowe was wearing one of those intricate masks with silver filigree and blood red feathers that contrasted sharply against her jet black dress. Her eyes twinkled with mischief as she caught my gaze and lifted her glass of mulled wine in a silent toast. I raised my own mug in response, and she winked, a signal I understood well enough.

Every bit a goddess, and don't let them forget it.

She'd been by my side through more than I cared to count, and was always there to help me shake off some of the burden I'd been carrying.

A shriek of laughter from the front door pulled my attention away. A small group of trick-or-treaters in adorable costumes had arrived, their pumpkin-shaped baskets nearly overflowing with candy. I watched as Missy ushered them inside, offering them hot cocoa and homemade caramel apples. She'd thought of everything tonight. *Of course she had.*

The sounds of soft conversations, the laughter of children, and the clink of silverware on plates melded into a soft hum, filling the room with a cozy energy. It was more than just the food or the party, though they were undeniably comforting. It was the people. It was the fact that tonight, I wasn't alone in this— I had family, my real family, right here with me. I finally set my cider aside and reached for a plate. A scoop of mashed potatoes, a slice of chicken breast, and yes— one generous serving of brownie pie. The first bite melted in my mouth, sweet and bitter all at once.

"Feeling better?" Grandma's voice was low, but it carried across the room to me, almost as if by magic.

I nodded, then reached for the wine glass Wesley had offered me earlier. "Yeah. Just needed a moment, I think."

"And now that I'm here," she said with a small grin, "we'll get this sorted."

Her words were soft, but solid. Like the foundation of the house around us. The shadows weren't so frightening when you knew someone stood by your side, especially when you couldn't just use your powers to fix it all.

I guess I would need to talk to her about that, too...

I took a long sip of my wine, savoring the warmth of it as it spread through me. The chatter of the party buzzed around me, but Grandma's voice cut through the noise, pulling my attention back to her. She was watching me with those sharp, knowing eyes of hers, the same eyes I'd inherited. The weight of her gaze was familiar, an old blanket wrapped around your shoulders.

"Tomorrow," she began, her voice quiet but purposeful. "We'll head out into the woods. Do a little... rootin' around, as it were."

I raised an eyebrow at her choice of words. "Rooting around? You mean like a foraging scavenger hunt?"

Grandma chuckled, the sound rich and dry, like leaves crunching beneath boots. "Sorta. The forest's full of old things, old magic. We might find somethin' to help with this situation of yours."

I glanced over at Wesley and Marlowe, who were deep in conversation now, their heads tilted together. Missy had excused herself to tend to a few more partygoers, so for a moment, it felt like the two of us were in our own little world.

I set my glass down on the table with a soft clink. My stomach fluttered nervously, though I wasn't sure if it was the wine or the thought of the trek back into the woods. "I mean, it's not exactly a quick fix situation."

Gramma leaned back in her chair, the flickering firelight making her silver-streaked hair look like it was aglow with magic. "Magic rarely is, darlin'. It's never just handed to you on a silver platter. You have to go lookin' for it, sometimes in the most unexpected places. I've spent all my life in the woods, listening to the whispers of the old roots. You'll see. We're not going to the usual spots, either. We'll find somethin'— somethin' that might just tip the scales in your favor."

There was always something about Gramma's magic that felt like walking on a tightrope— daring, unpredictable, but somehow exactly what I needed in the moment.

"And what if we don't find anything?" I asked, voice softer now. It wasn't that I didn't trust her— it was just hard to swallow the idea of putting all my hope into something so uncertain, given the absolute shenanigans of my life recently.

She smiled, but it wasn't the comforting kind of smile I was used to. This one was sly, knowing. "Oh, we'll find something. The forest remembers. And I've never failed to find what I'm looking for when I've got my wits about me." Her eyes flicked to the door for a moment, watching the trick-or-treaters continue their rounds. "Besides, you've got a few more tricks up your sleeve than you're giving yourself credit for. There's more to you than just death, child."

I blinked, her words stirring something deep inside of me, a small flicker of warmth I hadn't felt in a long time. "I've been... I've been feeling a little lost," I confessed, the vulnerability creeping out before I could stop it. "Like I'm not sure where I fit anymore."

Gramma's face softened, and for a moment, she looked like the woman who had raised me— gentle, steady, full of the quiet strength I could never seem to grasp for myself. "You've got plenty of time to figure it out. Some fresh air will help you see things clearly. We all need help sometimes, even the strongest among us. I've been in your shoes more times than you know."

I let her words wash over me, the tension in my chest loosening, if only a little. A sudden thought struck me, of darkness and shadows, and I couldn't help but ask, "What if we find something dangerous?"

Gramma's grin widened, and her eyes glittered with mischief. "If we do, then we'll deal with it. There's no such thing as a hunt without a few risks. But you'll be fine. You've got your Gramma with you. And I've never lost a hunt yet."

I swallowed, feeling the pulse of the old magic that ran through our blood. I wasn't entirely sure what tomorrow would bring, but something in me— something deeper than the fear— grew ready to face it. Gramma always had a way of making me believe I could handle anything.

"All right," I said, nodding slowly. "Tomorrow it is."

Her eyes twinkled, and she reached over, giving my hand a squeeze. "Good. We'll get this sorted, sweetheart. And maybe we'll have a little fun while we're at it."

Four

I escorted Gramma Betta to the room Missy had graciously assigned her, down the hallway from my own. *Liatris Room*, it said on its gilded plate. I quirked my lips. “Odd, she doesn’t use scientific names on the rest of the rooms.”

“Because *Blazing Star* doesn’t have the same drawl as Magnolia or Azalea, I’m afraid,” I heard Missy from behind me.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You got me there,” I conceded, “but it’s a great flower all the same. And perfect for you, Gramma: tall, prickly, need I go on?”

“Ohhh,” she crooned back, “she’s a whip crack with jokes.”

I smiled, suddenly fifteen again, sitting on our old wooden fence together, watching the sunset and trading quips back and forth. It created a different ache in the pit of my belly, how I missed that place.

The room was glittering in bursts of pale purple and warm green, the rugs and bedclothes all in the same matching *verdant field* shade. Starburst sculptures adorned the walls in tall clusters, just like the namesake flower, various hues of indigo and mauve.

“I like it,” Gramma Betta finally said after a minute or two, dropping her bags onto the hardwood floor.

Missy beamed. “Well, it’s yours as long as you need it. Tessa here has been such a peach during her stay!”

Gramma crinkled her nose. “Te—”

“Thank you so much, Missy. As always,” I interrupted, knowing what was coming. I turned toward Gramma and hauled one bag up onto the bed. “Want me to help you unpack?”

* * * * *

It felt like hours had passed by before we finally pulled the last items from her bags. Various tinctures, herbs, spell components, dowsing rods, the least of all spare clothing, all organized into the drawers and dressers in the room. There were about a million things I wanted to ask, all clogged up in my throat. Gramma Betta took one sidelong glance at me.

“All right, spill it. What’s wrong?”

“Is mom doing okay?” I blurted, louder than I intended.

“She’s fine, child. Takin’ care of the homestead. She knows I’m gone, and she knows I came to find you. Other than that, she’s safe.”

I sighed deep, exhaling the tension. “Good. Good. I’ve been so afraid of everything. I’ve been trying to protect everyone, and—”

“It’s exhausting, isn’t it?” She placed a hand on my knee, sitting on the bed next to me. “There will always be fear, when you love somethin’. Fear of harm, fear of ill intentions. But we can’t be scared forever, and most of all, we can’t be scared to take action. Do it scared— that’s what us Gardners do. Now, what else?” I thought for a moment, letting myself zone out before replying. “Why did they take the Slip?”

She raised an eyebrow. “The Sun Ones? Because it’s powerful. You know that. It holds secrets we mortal folk shouldn’t have. They thought they deserved it more than us, so they connived and schemed until they took it.” She shrugged. “Maybe it was theirs in the first place, somewhere along the lines of history. But I won it fair and square, and it’s been ours ever since.”

“Why didn’t you fight to take it back?” The question was almost painful to ask; I wasn’t accusing her of not being brave enough, but I pondered it all the same, and my filters were bare to nonexistent.

She stared at me, calculating. “Tressa, I am singularly no match for the Sun Throne. I’m old, darlin’, and I was in no position for fightin’. I wasn’t gonna have anyone else fight my battles, either, so I was bidin’ my time, figuring out a plan. And then someone younger and smarter than me stole it back without a fight.”

I couldn’t help smiling.

“We are the only coven we have; I have nothin’ beyond our family, and that’s sparse these days. I wasn’t about to endanger your momma or you in that endeavor.”

I thought of the coven here in Slooswell, tenuous and semi-splintered as it might be. Vera hadn’t spoken to me at all since The Woods, and it had been a while for Cynthia and Esmé, too. Elowen had come into the bookshop a few times, to check on the Broonie and shore up the wards, but even she stayed to herself most of the time.

“But we’re in danger all the same, ain’t we?” She interrupted my thoughts before they spiraled further.

I nodded.

“I wasn’t gonna let our legacy go, if that’s what you’re thinking. We were witches before the Slip, and we would be witches after it, too. If it never came back, I’d have just taught you lot everything I could before...” She trailed off. “It might not have been as powerful, or the same, but still.”

Her eyes suddenly sparkled, alight with magic. “Let me see it.”

I led her back to my room, locked the door, and carefully pulled the encyclopedia from its drawer. It had a brightness all its own, glowing an amethyst shade as Gramma Betta came closer. “Ah, there she is,” running her hand across the book containing our legacy, still folded up tight, still sealed. “That’s my girl.”

Five

The grounds were thick with fog, the damp chill of fall settling into my bones as I followed Gramma through the mossy woods. Her steps were sure, though her old joints creaked beneath her. I'd long since stopped asking about the aches in her knees; she'd always just wave me off with a wink. "Doesn't bother me, girl. I know how to make things work."

I studied the treelines all around us. The whispers in the trees felt close, and sharp.

Gramma stopped, her hand lifted. I watched in awe as the shadows seemed to stretch unnaturally around her, following her every move. She flicked a finger through the air, a low hum vibrating through the ground. Something was hiding in the fog—something Gramma was eager to get.

"You wanna find the Helpful Folk," she said, her voice low and gravelly, "you've got to make 'em want to find *you*. Don't go rushin' in, demanding answers." She raised an eyebrow, glancing over her shoulder at me. "This isn't the kind of thing you force, girl."

I noticed how careful she was, not saying my name.

"You gotta coax 'em. And you gotta make sure it's *you* they're lookin' for." She crouched down near a cluster of moss-covered stones, pulling a small leather pouch from the folds of her cardigan. The pungent scent of dried herbs filled the air as she tipped the pouch, spilling a few colorful berries, dusted in gold, onto the ground. They glowed faintly in the dim light, an iridescent shimmer catching the mist.

"The key," Gramma muttered, rolling the berries around in a circle, "is to make them curious. Pixies, for example, love sweets, but they're mischievous, see? You want to control the bait, not have them runnin' away with it before you can blink."

I knelt beside her, the dampness of the earth seeping through the knees of my jeans. "You think they'll actually come? Or help?" Help seemed way less likely.

She chuckled softly. "If we've done it right, they will. But if you're serious about finding them, you've got to respect 'em. They're spirits, enlightened creatures. It's not about chasing them down— that's a threat. It's about *inviting* them."

I frowned, unsure. "I don't get it. If they're spirits, how come I can't feel them all the time? I'm supposed to *feel* these things, right?"

Gramma looked up at me, her eyes gleaming. She reached out, brushing a finger down my cheek. "The dead are easy to find, sugar. They leave marks— cold, hollow spaces that you can follow. But living, ethereal spirits? They don't always leave traces. You gotta call 'em the way they want to be called. That means knowing their rhythms.

Their whispers.”

She stood, brushing the dirt off her hands. “Now, watch.”

She raised her arms slowly, as though reaching for something unseen, something just beyond the veil. She muttered a low chant, her voice deep and resonant, threading through the mist. I felt it then— like a sudden, sharp chill crawling under my skin, a pulse of something ancient, something that hummed in time with my heartbeat.

I held my breath, watching her intently. Slowly, the fog seemed to thicken, swirling in tighter rings around us. The glow from the berries brightened. A soft giggle, like the flutter of wings, brushed through the air.

Gramma’s lips curled into a satisfied smile. “That’s it. You hear ‘em?”

I nodded, my throat tight. The giggles grew louder, the unmistakable sound of tiny feet skittering on bark, wings brushing against the wind. My pulse quickened, the hairs on my neck standing at attention. Pixies. I could feel them now— quick and curious, playful and sharp.

Gramma gave me a knowing look. “Told you. Find the right rhythm, girl. Find the right call, and they’ll come. Now, let them show you what they want you to see.”

I settled in, letting my gaze soften to a bare blur.

As the first pixie flitted out of the fog, its glow casting eerie shadows over the trees, I swallowed my nerves. Gramma’s eyes gleamed as the creature fluttered closer, its wings a blur of shimmering light. It darted in a tight circle, giggling to itself in the way only something too clever for its own good would. Others followed, appearing like flashes of fireflies, weaving between the mist and the trees, their tiny voices overlapping, all of them speaking at once, too fast for me to catch everything.

“What have we got here, hmm?” Gramma asked, her voice steady, though her lips twitched like she was fighting a smile. “Curious little things, aren’t you?”

The pixies flashed about, snatching up the berries one by one.

“Tut tut, little ones, you can have the berries if you answer a question I’ve got. Have you seen a big shadow creature around these parts? Or— oh— maybe a white deer?”

The pixies froze mid-flight, their wings fluttering in place like they’d hit an invisible wall. A few of them exchanged quick glances, their tiny eyes flashing with uncertainty. They zipped around us, flicking in and out of the fog like sparks from a fire, their voices quick and high-pitched.

“A shadow?” one piped up, almost too fast for me to understand, but the tone was clearly skeptical.

“Deer, deer, white as snow! Yes, yes! But shadow? Shadow’s bad,” another added, darting around us in circles, its wings casting tiny reflections on the foggy ground. “The

shadow moves, like this!” It flicked its fingers in the air, mimicking a quick, jerking movement, then flared its arms wide, as if to show something enormous.

Gramma leaned forward, her expression as calm as ever, though I could tell she was measuring every word the pixies said. They were quick and slippery, not easy to pin down— too light to grasp, too playful to take seriously, and yet they always knew something. *That*, I thought proudly, *was something I did know*.

“Tell me more about this shadow,” Gramma pressed, her voice gentle but firm. She poured more berries onto the ground. The pixies flittered again, their bodies so fast they blurred in the fog.

“Feels bad! Bad-feeling, that one,” a third one squeaked, its wings buzzing rapidly, a high-pitched shriek following its words. “It eats, eats, eats!” Then it vanished, reappearing behind us with another giggle, the sound of its wings like the rustle of tall grass in the wind.

“Not always from around here,” another pixie chirped, its tiny face twitching with excitement as it hovered near my ear. “It’s hunting! *Hunting!* It likes to play... but not like us! Not fun.”

I glanced at Gramma, who was nodding slowly, her hands still folded neatly in front of her. She was letting them talk. They were scattering, zipping in and out, and I could barely keep track of them. Their voices came in bursts— sharp, quick, almost unintelligible.

“And the deer?” I asked, trying to bring some clarity to the confusion. “What about the white deer?”

“We *liked* it!” the first pixie shrieked, zooming up to Gramma’s face with a startling speed. “It was bright, shining— *beautiful!*”

“The deer’s *not* for you,” another added cryptically, before darting back into the mist. “It’s not for *them* either.”

A few of the others burst into a flurry of chatter, all overlapping. They seemed excited, but I could tell they were also hiding something— something they didn’t want to reveal.

Gramma held up a hand, enticing them all with a flick of her wrist. “Easy now, easy. You’ve seen the shadow and the deer, but there’s more, isn’t there? What else have you seen? Is the shadow coming back?”

They fell silent for a brief moment, hovering in place, as if they were calculating the decision of whether to speak. Finally, one of them zipped forward again, its voice low and teasing.

“You’ll see,” it giggled. “You’ll *see* soon enough. It’s *coming*.”

“Enough games,” Gramma said, her voice sharper now. “Tell me, *will* the deer help? Will it stop the shadow?”

The pixies didn’t answer. Instead, they darted in and out of the mist one more time, a burst of laughter trailing behind them as they flickered through the air, and then, just like that, they were gone— vanished into the fog, leaving only the echoes of their voices.

I blinked, still trying to process the whirlwind of their words. Gramma glanced over at me, her expression unreadable.

“Well, now we know a little more,” she said, standing straight and brushing her hands together. “The shadow’s hunting. And the deer,” she paused, lips curling, “well, it may not come to our aid at all.”

“But what does that mean?” I asked, my mind still tangled in the pixies’ riddle. “The deer’s *not* for us? And what about the shadow— not always from here? Does that mean I—?”

“We’ll find out soon,” Gramma interrupted gently. “The pixies, they can twist things, like all Folk do. They hold their knowledge above everyone else’s, especially a human’s. But they always leave a trace of truth. You just gotta follow the trail... and trust that you’ll know what to do when you get there.”

I looked out into the fog, feeling the hairs on the back of my neck rise. The shadow was out there. And the white deer... well, it seemed like it was going to be a lot harder to find than I’d thought. But if I was going to stop what was coming, I’d need to know what Gramma knew— and what the pixies weren’t saying.

I watched her, the fog thickening around us, my thoughts still tumbling over the pixies’ cryptic words. The mist made everything feel more distant, as if the woods were a place caught between worlds— both real and not, full of hidden things.

I took a step closer to her, the sound of my boots muffled by the damp earth. “Gramma,” I asked quietly, “how do you know about the White Deer? I mean, I’ve never heard you talk about it before, and *I* didn’t mention it to you. How do you *really* know about it?”

She didn’t answer immediately. Instead, she turned her face toward the trees, eyes narrowing like she was straining to hear something just beyond reach. The pixies had vanished, but the air still hummed with their energy. Gramma seemed to feel it too. She sighed, low and slow, before she turned back to me with that look— like she was gauging how much to say.

“I reckon I’ve known about the White Deer longer than you’ve been alive, sugar,” she said, her voice soft but steady. She bent down, grasping a stray leaf off the ground, fingers working with the careful precision I always admired. “This land’s got stories.

Lots of ‘em. And my family was here longer than most. We knew the trees, the roots, and the wind better than we knew our own skin.”

I stared at her, the pieces starting to click into place. “You mean... this was *your* land? I always assumed we were from out east.”

She nodded. “My great-great-granddaddy had a piece of land here long before we ever had a name for it. We had been here through every season, through every storm, and when the leaves turned in the fall, we heard the stories in the wind. It was always like that... before things changed. Folk around here would tell stories about the White Deer– some called it a spirit, some said it was a protector. But the truth? The truth’s a bit more complicated.”

I took a step back, caught off guard by the way her words shifted. The woods felt suddenly colder, the fog thicker, like the trees themselves were listening. “What do you mean?”

Gramma’s eyes flicked back to mine, sharp and unblinking. “The deer’s a guardian, yes. It protects against the shadows and haints that hunt these woods, like the one you’re feelin’ now. And, in these parts, when there’s an imbalance– when something isn’t right– the deer comes for reckoning. And you might find yourself tangled in things you didn’t ask for.” She paused, her voice quieter now, almost like she was talking to herself. “There’s always a cost for that help.”

I swallowed hard, her words sinking in, matching Vera’s warning from before. “I’ve heard that twice now. What kind of cost?”

Her lips twitched, but she didn’t smile. “Not always a fair one. Those who seek the deer... they’re often asked to give something in return. Sometimes it’s a price they didn’t fathom they’d have to pay.”

I felt a cold shiver creep up my spine at the implication. “And the shadow?”

“Ah,” Gramma’s voice dropped, her gaze now distant, like she was seeing something far away. “The shadow’s old. Older than any of us. It’s not natural, Tressa. We call it the *wayward stranger*, same way people use *Folk* and *Kind Ones* for the others. It isn’t always the same shadow, I suppose, but I’d bet anything this one *is*.”

I felt the chill settle deeper into my chest. The pixies had been right to warn me. They weren’t just mischievous little creatures, they were *keepers* of this knowledge. The deer wasn’t just a harmless spirit; it was a part of the balance of this land– and whatever bargain it had to strike to keep the shadow at bay, it would require something. Something *big*.

I stared at Gramma Betta, trying to wrap my head around it all. “You’ve *seen* the deer, haven’t you?”

Her smile was thin, almost wistful. “Oh, I’ve seen it, all right. In the way the fog thickens and the air gets heavy. In the whispers that run through the trees, just before the sun sets. It comes and goes, as it’s needed. It can’t be tamed, but it can be called. But... like I said, you don’t *ask* for the deer’s help unless you’re ready to pay.”

I felt my heart beating faster as I tried to push the fear aside. The deer was part of the reason I was here, according to Vera. But the deeper I dug into these woods, the more I realized how little I knew.

“What happens if we can’t make the deal?” I asked, voice small but steady. “What if we can’t stop the shadow?”

Gramma’s gaze softened just slightly, her eyes meeting mine with an understanding that only came from years of really *seeing* things. “Then you might just have to make a choice, Tressa. A choice no one wants to make. But if you’re truly a death witch like I know you are, you’ll understand this... there’s always something lost when you step into the realm of spirits. And sometimes, it’s not just the shadows you’re up against. It’s the things you’ve left behind.”

She was being so *cryptic*, speaking in the way the Folk always did, half riddle, half prophecy, all confusing. The wind picked up around us, a swirl of cold air that carried the scent of the forest— damp, earthy, ancient. I felt the pull of The Woods deep inside me, and shivered.

“We’ll have the help we need,” she surmised after a while of silence, “they’ll be back.”

Six

Working in such a weird state was, well, *weird*. As if there weren't greater things happening out in the world besides selling Ms. Cheney the new romance novel by her favorite author.

The fact that I knew it was her favorite author made me smile, a little bittersweet tug at my growing affection for this town.

Thankfully, no one had asked me about Gramma's *Tressa Rae* comment back on Halloween. They just kept calling me Tessa, or Miss Jones. Which was good, though I wondered how much longer I could keep everything under wraps. You know, with shadow monsters and Folk and every other nutty thing around. While I toiled away at the bookshop, Gramma had ventured back into The Woods— an idea I hated, her going alone, despite her being infinitely more powerful than me, even without the Slip being used. She knew most of it by heart, she swore, and she had no signature that the Folk would be following— she made sure of that.

I sighed, flattening my face onto the cool front counter. "Mart?" I called, unmoving. "Hmm?"

"If anyone calls for me, tell them I'm dead."

He *harrumphed* in reply, and I could hear his footsteps approaching the cashwrap. "All good?"

I let my face loll to one side. "My insides might explode with everything going on in my life."

That was more honest than I meant.

Harrumph again. "Wanna talk?"

I peered up at him, cockeyed. "Oh Mart, I wouldn't burden you with—"

He waved my sentence away. "Talk."

I slumped up to leaning on the counter instead. "Well, you saw my Gramma's dramatic appearance, and my family's dealing with something, and there's too many moving parts to keep up with everything."

He simply stared, his jaw set.

"I feel out of place, and out of time, and like I'm a stranger to myself, and I hold so much back..." I waited. "This is usually the place where people offer empty platitudes or pearls of wisdom."

"Don't have any," he replied plainly, folding his arms and leaning against the counter, his back to the register, "but I hope it helps you to talk about it."

I couldn't help smiling. "Thanks, Mart."

Seven

“I have good news,” Gramma Betta began, her face marked with soil, twigs still stuck in her hair. “I’ve officially enlisted a *little bit* of help for when the big one comes.”

That was as subtle as she could be, I guess. We were surrounded by people, seated at a low table in a cafe across town that evening. She sipped at a hot cup of berry tea, adding copious amounts of honey.

“Oh?” I queried, expecting her to continue without prompting.

She nodded, her eyes closed as she inhaled the steam wafting from her drink. “We’re ready.”

My eyebrows quirked. “Already?”

She sat her cup down, looking exasperated. “How long do you think we have to wait? We have to figure out whatever this thing is. You might be used to this leisurely, small town schedule now, but the rest of the world ain’t waitin’ around. Especially not out there,” she gestured to the window, to the darkening forest beyond the east side of the town. “No... you’ve got to act.”

I had a dozen different responses lined up, but every outcome would have been the same. “Okay,” I said, adding nothing else. “Tomorrow then? Since it’s already after eight.”

“Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow,” she replied snappily, “always tomorrow.”

“Okay, fine: now? Let’s go right now.” I didn’t mean such an insolent tone, but damn, I felt tapped out.

Gramma Betta grinned a feral grin. “That’s more like it.”

Eight

The fog had thickened even more by the time we reached the clearing, the trees around us stretching into twisted silhouettes against the darkening sky. It was quiet now, far too quiet, as if the forest was holding its breath. My skin prickled— something ancient and dangerous was closeby.

Gramma stood tall at the edge of the clearing, her eyes narrowed in concentration. She wasn't afraid. She hadn't been afraid of anything in all the years I'd known her. The flickering lights of the pixies stuttered around her, darting in and out of the mist like the flash of a firefly in a windstorm. They eventually hovered close, their tiny voices murmuring, their energy a buzzing whir.

The pixies, I'd learned, were actually a part of her enlisted help. She'd been so cryptic about it all, I hadn't asked much beyond that.

"You ready, Tressa?" Gramma's voice cut through the silence. She glanced at me over her shoulder, her face set in a hard, determined line.

I swallowed my trepidation. I had no idea what we were about to face; a shadow, sure, but what did that entail? The pixies were starting to grow restless, flashing in and out of the fog, their wings beating in quick, sharp bursts.

"I'm ready," I said, even though I wasn't sure I actually *was*. But I had to be. The shadow was hunting me, and the time for waiting had passed.

"Good," Gramma muttered, her hands spread flat in front of her as she gathered the energy around us. She spoke in a language older than The Woods themselves, words that resonated with meaning I couldn't quite grasp but could feel in my bones. The pixies circled faster, their movement creating a strange, high-pitched song, an accompaniment threading through Gramma's words.

The air thickened, charged with magic, and I felt it in my chest— an electric hum that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The fog shifted again, swirling tighter as a shadow moved within it, a dark, twisting shape that loomed taller than any tree around us.

A deep, guttural growl rumbled from the edge of the wood beyond, the ground beneath our feet trembling slightly. I could hear it now— the sound of a thousand whispers, voices all tangled together, speaking in so many languages. It felt like they were crawling inside my head, slipping through the cracks of my mind, all ancient, all *hungry*.

Gramma raised her hands higher, her voice rising, becoming clearer. The fog parted

as if being pushed by invisible hands, and there, in the center of the clearing, it appeared— a massive figure, cloaked in shadow, its form shifting and undulating, never fully solid. It was as if the darkness itself had taken shape, an ever-changing silhouette that towered above us.

"Shadow being, darkness reveler, I speak to you. Return to your true form," Gramma's voice rang out, "I demand it!"

The creature howled, rallying against her power, its form nearly sparking with dark magic.

"Wayward stranger, I said I *demand* it!" She pushed against the swirling current, nearly a tornado of dark clouds and pulsing gloom. The pixies darted around us, their wings vibrating with the intensity of the spell Gramma was weaving. Their voices joined the rhythm of her words, a thrum building in the air, a storm squall ready to break upon the creature.

The shadow paused, its dark form rippling. Then, with a noise like a thousand crows taking flight, it shifted, its shape folding and twisting like smoke being sucked back into the earth.

And there, for just a moment, the shape of a man appeared— tall and thin, his face shadowed beneath the hood of a tattered cloak. I felt something in my chest lurch as recognition clicked into place. The power that emanated from him... I knew it intimately. I hadn't seen that face before, but I had imagined it in the stories Gramma Betta told me when I was little. I stepped back, my heart pounding. "That's him, isn't it?" I whispered to Gramma. "The one who—?"

"Oh piss, it's you?!" Gramma's eyes were fixed on the shadow's humanoid form. She stepped forward. "He's a curse that's been following us all these years!" She shoved a crooked finger at him. "*You're* the wayward stranger?!"

The shadow figure— the faerie man from every cautionary tale of my youth— growled, his form shifting violently, as if the weight of time itself was pushing against him. "You took what was mine," his voice was deep, a rasp like gravel dragged across stone. "It was never meant for you, witch. You were *not* meant to hold it."

Gramma's lips curled into a thin smile. "I won it fair and square, Remias. You know that. You shouldn't have picked such a precious thing to bargain if you weren't willin' to lose it. I cannot believe— you?! —causing all this damned trouble."

Gramma's hands flared outward, and the pixies let out a loud shriek, their voices slicing through the mist, chasing the shadow's form. "And now, you'll return to where you belong. The Woods are not your kingdom to haunt," Gramma demanded, a forceful spell carved from the very earth itself. "Return to your true form. Leave my family alone."

You belong in the Other, where you were born. No more. No more of this haunting.”

The shadow twisted, its form struggling against the pull of the spell. The air thickened even more, and I felt the weight of it pressing on me, almost suffocating. But I could feel it— the Slip's source power, buried deep in the woods, in the heart of the curse that had been wrapped around Gramma's family for three generations. The air itself vibrated with fury as the shadow fought to hold onto the form it had manifested.

“You cannot banish me,” he hissed, his voice a whisper now, fading as he lost his grip on the physical world. “I will return. I will always return.”

Gramma was still standing, her arms outstretched, her voice low as she called the power of the land to contain the creature. But the shadow wasn't retreating. It was *fighting*— its form expanding and contracting, refusing to yield. There was something about him, something beyond the curse, beyond the land's history. It felt like we were no longer ourselves, but players caught in a game that had been far too long. Their wills struggled against one another, pushing and yanking and filling the deep woods with a heady tornado of magic.

But slowly, finally, it began to shrink. The darkness stubbornly receded, the man's form flickering as it became more insubstantial, his features still contorted with rage. The pixies were quiet now, their tiny forms flickering around Gramma Betta. The figure, that man of smoke and shadow, stood like a specter before us, his outline flickering, almost imperceptible in the thickening fog. The ground felt alive beneath my feet, the sheer pressure of his will palpable, even when subdued.

My heart pounded in my chest, an instinct deep within me warning that there was something true to his words, something we couldn't just *banish and it stay gone*. I glanced at Gramma, but she wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were locked on the shadow, her face stern, every muscle still taut and ready. This was her fight. And yet, I could feel the pull of the curse tugging at my own soul.

I didn't know if I was ready for it, but in that moment, it was clear: he would forever be tied to us, so long as we humans held any of the power he sought. I stepped forward, drawing Gramma's gaze. "Wait," I said, my voice steady despite the rush of adrenaline. "What if... What if we make a bargain instead?"

Gramma's eyebrows knitted, and the pixies paused in mid-flight, their tiny eyes flashing in the dim light. For a moment, everything went still.

The wayward stranger's form flickered again, the faintest hint of curiosity twisting his features. He was listening, waiting. His voice came, low and guttural.

"Another bargain?" His tone was almost amused. "What could you offer me, child? You think you can stop me with mere words? Do you think those before you haven't

tried?"

I stepped closer, trying to steady my breath, knowing this was the moment. Knowing it was time to take control.

"I offer you a truce," I said, my voice stronger now, grounding itself in the very heart of my power. "Help us protect what is ours against the Sun Folk, those who hunt both me *and* the source of *your* power. Help me with that, and when it's all over, when we're free from their reach, we will share what we've kept from you."

Gramma's eyes narrowed, but she didn't speak. Her silence was a heavy weight behind me.

"And why would I help you?," the spirit asked, its form writhing with jaded mockery. "You offer an idea, a whimsy, a promise that may never come."

"I know it's a gamble," I said quickly, "but you know as well as I do that I can't fight them alone. And neither can you. As a whole, the Sun Folk are too strong. If they get their hands on the artifact, which they fully intend to, neither of us will ever see that knowledge again. But together, we could protect the Slip from them. Protect *us* and everyone wins."

I had no idea if the wayward stranger actually called it the Slip, or if we made that up along the line.

The creature's form rippled, its presence leaning forward in the fog, drawn in by the prospect of what I was offering. I could feel the pull of something otherworldly, the call of the artifact that had once been his— something more than just a piece of power.

"And once they're gone," I continued, my voice a little more forceful now, "we will share the power. I'm offering you a choice."

For a long moment, there was silence, the only sound the faint rustling of the fog around us. The pixies flittered excitedly, as if they, too, were waiting to see how this bargain played out.

Finally, the being's voice rumbled again, lower this time, like a distant thunderstorm.

"You would share it with me?" The question was laced with disbelief, but there was something else in it— something like hope. "*You* would give it up? After everything?"

I nodded, my heart beating faster. "When the Sun Fae stop chasing me— when we're safe, for good— I'll share it. But you have to help us first." I reiterated my points, knowing damn well how slippery the Fae could be. No loopholes.

The faerie— Remias?— shifted again, and for a brief second, I saw it— his true face. Not the mask of smoke and darkness, but something more *human*— a man who had lived and lost. His eyes were burning with a strange, hollow fire, and I could *see* the

hesitation in his gaze. The bargain was a dangerous one for him too, and I knew it.

It was as if the stranger wasn't just after power, but had been waiting for an end to this long, drawn-out struggle.

Finally, he bowed its head, its voice echoing like a gust of wind through dead branches.

"I'll help you," he said. "Not because I trust you, but because I trust that when the time comes, I'll have what's mine. And when the fae are gone, I'll return for what you've promised."

A cold shiver ran down my spine, and I glanced at Gramma Betta, who stood silent, her face unreadable.

She'd made bargains before.

She stepped forward, her voice firm. "You know the rules, Remias. When it's over, you keep your word. We'll keep ours."

The figure bowed low, the last of its form flickering into a wisp of pale mist before it vanished entirely, leaving behind only the silence of the woods.

I let out a breath that held every bit of air in my lungs. *By Circe's holy Moly.*

I was suddenly hyper aware of the sweat on my skin, stark against the cold air that permeated the area. I shivered, insides quaking with far more than just *chill*.

Gramma stood still for a moment, her gaze finally softening, a strange blink as if she was returning to her body. She turned toward me, lips curling into a small, approving smile. "Well now, Tressa Rae," she said, her voice laced with an edge of something deep, ancient, and knowing. "Seems like you've learned more than I thought."

I blinked, caught off guard by the words. "What do you mean?"

She stepped closer, her boots crunching softly in the damp leaves as she moved, her eyes studying me in a way that felt clearer than the fog surrounding us. "When I made my deal with the faerie," she began, her voice distant, recalling something from another life, "I wasn't much younger than you are now. But it wasn't the artifact I was after. No, it was more than that. It was the respect, the power. I needed to prove I wasn't some helpless witch, left to pick up the scraps of a faerie's game. I made a bet, and I *won*." She smiled then, a thin, knowing smile. "Not because I was better at the game, but because I understood the rules."

I felt a strange, fierce pride swelling inside me as she spoke, my chest tightening with something that felt like fire and ice all at once. I wasn't sure what kind of bargain I had struck, what I was *really* getting myself into, but hearing her speak about her own past— about *her* victory— made me feel seen, understood. She studied me for a moment.

"You think you made the right choice?" She asked, her voice soft but steady as she

studied me.

"I think it was the only choice," I said quietly. The bargain was made. The shadow had agreed, for now. "But I'm not sure what happens next."

Gramma's lips curled into a faint, knowing smile. "That's how these things go, Tressa. We don't always know what happens next. Just make sure the shadow doesn't forget his part of the bargain." She paused, her gaze lingering on the treeline ahead. "Make damn sure."

We stood there for a long moment, the woods around us heavy with lingering magic, the heft of the deal I'd made. The pixies swooped to and fro, playing in the last echoes of tangible magic. The fog began to thin, and I felt a new sense of purpose settle over me.

"I've always been proud of you, Tressa," she said slowly, a tired warmth creeping into her voice.

I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at the corner of my mouth. It was as if I had stepped into a deeper place, a new understanding of myself that I hadn't known was there; I wasn't just carrying on the family legacy— I was starting to shape it in my own way.

Gramma turned her gaze back to the clearing, the fog beginning to thin around us, and her voice lowered, almost to a whisper, as if sharing a secret. "You've got a sharp mind. And you've got your head on your shoulders in a way I didn't expect."

That swell of pride caught in my chest all over again. It wasn't just about surviving anymore— it was about owning my place in this world. Whether I was ready or not. Gramma had made her bargains, fought her battles, and come out the other side. She had paved the way for me— *our* way. I was ready to walk that path, to forge my own destiny, whatever it might cost. There were still so many unknowns, so many battles left to fight. But I wasn't just a player in this game anymore— I was part of the story. And for the first time, I felt ready to write my own chapters.

"I'll do whatever it takes," I said, the words firm and sure as they left my mouth.

Gramma looked at me for a long moment, her gaze wistful. "I know you will. You're a Gardner."

We stood there for a moment, the forest around us quiet and still. The pixies had disappeared into the fog, their light dimming as the magic faded into the night.

And in the distance, I could almost hear the faintest rustling in the trees. A shadow stirring, perhaps, a glittering in the dark.

Nine

The night had settled in deep by the time we made it back to town. The streets were quieter than usual, the fog lingering like a ghost between the buildings. The air still carried that chill from the woods, but it felt different against my skin— almost soothing.

Gramma's footsteps were steady and sure beside me, though her movements were slower than usual. I couldn't help but notice the way she glanced at the buildings we passed, the old homes with creaky porches, the businesses that had been around longer than I'd been alive. She'd always been someone who lived with one foot in the past, holding tight to family history, but tonight... tonight, there was something new in her eyes.

When we reached the Tender's Rest, I noticed she didn't immediately head inside. Instead, she paused, her back straight, eyes lifting to the distant horizon where the last bits of sun had long faded. It was strange, watching her this way— quiet, thoughtful. "Tressa," she said, her voice carrying a heaviness that I hadn't expected. She turned toward me, her hands folding in front of her, as though gathering her thoughts. "You've fought hard for what's yours. For what's *ours*." Her gaze sharpened, like she was looking beyond me. "But you can't keep running forever."

I frowned, the words catching me off guard. "What do you mean?"

Gramma took a breath, the conversation settling between us like the fog rolling over the ground. "You're always on the move, Tressa. Always one step ahead. But at some point, you have to stop. You need to decide what kind of life you want to have— what kind of life you're going to build for yourself." Her eyes softened, just a little, but it was enough to reveal the scared vulnerability beneath her words.

"Because," she continued, "if you don't, you'll always be chasing something *safer*. You'll never stop moving. Whether it's from shadows, from your past, from whatever you think is waiting around the corner. And you'll never have a chance to *live*."

I shifted awkwardly, unsure of how to respond. "They'll keep coming after me. After us all—"

"Then you'll fight them," she interrupted, her voice steady. "You'll do what you've always done: fight. But *you* get to decide what that fight looks like. It's your life, Tressa. You can't keep letting the fae and everything else control it. You can't hide in this B&B forever."

I stared at her, trying to process what she was saying. It suddenly seemed less about *me*, and more about the past. "Until it's over, the fae are always going to be out there,

chasing me.”

“And what if they are?” Gramma raised an eyebrow. “What if they’re always out there? You still have to live. You don’t have to hide. You can’t be afraid of the fight, because there will always be something else. But at the end of the day, you have to live *life on your own terms*.”

I looked away for a moment, at the streetlamps flickering in the distance, at the shadows stretching long across the ground. I’d already tried making allies, and in my time in Slooswell, I had. I knew the fight would come— I wasn’t mucking around, unprepared. But she wasn’t wrong; all this time, I’d been caught in a cycle— running from danger, trying to outsmart the fae, surviving, surviving, surviving. “You’re telling me to stay still,” I said slowly.

Gramma studied me with a look I couldn’t quite place, something both sharp and gentle. “Yes,” she said simply. “Find somewhere worth fighting for. Make your mark in this world. You have the strength to face anything, but you need to give yourself the chance to be more than just a witch in hiding.”

I stood there in the quiet; for the first time, I realized that I had been running not only from the Folk, but also because I didn’t want to face a future where I might *fail*. I’d been living in a limbo. But Gramma was right: I couldn’t keep running forever. And I couldn’t keep hiding in the shadows of my own life.

“So, what? Find a house? Settle down?” I asked, half-laughing at the idea. “Become a little cottage witch?”

Gramma chuckled softly, her gaze softening again. “Start with a cottage, if that’s what you want. Or a little cabin. Or an apartment. A place where you can put down roots. Make all of this have *meanin’*.” She seemed to slip into the past again, quiet for a few moments. “You can’t keep living for our past, Tressa. You have to decide what comes *next*.”

I looked at her then, really *looked* at her, and something in me shifted. “All right,” I said, insiders shivering. “All right. I’ll figure it out.”

Her smile widened, pride filling her eyes again. “Good girl. You don’t have to do it all at once, but you’ll figure it out. You always do.”

I lingered there, absorbing her words, the haze of the night still hanging thick in the air. A different weight had shifted, something I hadn’t even realized was there. It was the weight of *choosing* life, even when the fae were still out there, and the shadow of my past loomed large.

I had no idea what the future would hold, but for the first time in a long time, I felt like I could face it.

Ten

“We’ve secured her location, my Lord.” The oddly-shaped bulging creature flourished a deep bow, a spray of gilded warriors arranged in a wave behind him.

“Good,” said a radiant creature sitting upon a throne, blazing like the sun. “Let us reclaim what is ours.”

Eleven

I didn't know what came over me when I first decided to stay here. Maybe it was the charm of Slooswell, or the way the streets felt like they had secrets to tell, but I came here thinking it was temporary. Just a place to lay low for a while.

But now? Now, it feels like home.

It was a strange thing to admit, but it was true. Every time I thought about leaving, about taking my magic elsewhere, I remembered how Wesley's smile makes my heart skip a beat. How he knows the names of every plant and every person in the town. And how I feel like I've finally found my place among people like me. Yes, I missed where I came from, but I had also managed to find someplace new, and home is where you make it, right?

We were in the midst of a busy diner scene, halfway through two Kaley specials, when Wesley sighed.

"Worst timing," he replied glumly, "for all this chaos."

I tilted to face him, slicing through a runny egg. "Why's that? I mean, it's never a great time for some weird supernatural shit to happen, but still."

"I wanted to give you this," he held his balled hand forward, waiting. I placed my palm under it. "An All Hallow's Eve gift. Well, it's late now obviously—"

A key, tied with orange ribbon, fell delicately into my hand.

My eyes snapped to his, shock and wonder and every other feeling bubbling up into my expression. "Is this...?"

"Thought I could help you better from just one location," he replied, "plus, I can help you keep Lumori— right? Is that what you decided on?— contained. Protect you, protect the *you know what*, and maybe..." He trailed off, trying to shove his hands under the table, clanging against it awkwardly.

It felt like the world was quaking beneath me, my magic threatening to burst from every seam. I felt like crying, like running, every emotion you probably *shouldn't* feel when your boyfriend-ish guy gives you a key to his house. I was worried something would happen to him; I was happy I had an ally! I was terrified that I'd bring more awful creatures to this town; I was so damned lucky to have him. I was supposed to leave; I... desperately wanted to stay. "I don't know what to say..."

He closed the gap between us at the table, cupping his hand over mine, grounding all the magic that ran across my body. "Say you'll stay with me."

Gramma told me that I had to make choices, and live on my own terms. And when a goddess speaks, you listen.

Epilogue

The days tumbled ever closer to Thanksgiving, and beyond that, my second favorite holiday: Christmas. The entire holiday season, really; spirits were high, joy was easy to come by, and I loved doting on the ones I, well, *loved*. Yes, things would be different this year. But I was trying, and I was living. That's what counts, right?

Gramma Betta was still staying at the Tender's Rest, while I settled in at Wesley's place. I didn't know how homey I'd feel, the odd trepidation of relying on someone else's space and not my own. But I was trying.

I found myself saying that a lot: *I was trying*.

A relative quiet found its home in my life, until one night, plagued by nightmares, I took to Wesley's back yard for some fresh air. It was chilly, the unmistakable darkness of small towns and their lack of light pollution making the sky brilliant. In my dreams, I kept seeing gold; it grew in tufts from my mouth, gilded my eyes shut. My skin, hardening to a deadly sheen.

I knew what it meant.

They were coming.

The Magic Continues...

Tressa Rae Gardner's current misadventures in Slooswell will reach their climax in **BLINDING BRILLIANCE**, coming soon from Bard Girl Press!

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