Lenore

The Mrs. Macabre Chronicles, Volume 5

Austin Ray Bouse

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LENORE

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Written by Austin Ray Bouse.

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The Mrs. Macabre Chronicles
Mrs. Macabre
Merry Christmas, Mrs. Macabre
Mrs. Macabre And The Fear King
Happy Halloween, Mrs. Macabre
Lenore

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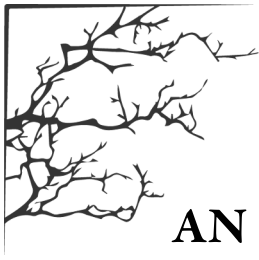
I would like to thank my parents for always supporting my creepy creations, my Universal Studios family for lighting the creative spark in me, and my editor Francesca Maver for making my words better than I ever could.

This book is dedicated to Harley(2010-2024). The best familiar a witch could ask for.

-A.R.B.



1.
AN ORPHAN, AN OWL, AND A BROOM



Once upon a time there was a girl named Lenore.

You may be more familiar with her as the witch Mrs. Macabre, but before she traveled across the Hallowland in a coffin-shaped manor filled with endless rooms, before she met her beloved wife Mrs. Mirth, before she befriended the talking scarecrow Jack Lantern, before she unleashed the terrible spirit known as the Weeping Widow, before she adventured with the Gracey twins along with their friend Bram Vasquez, she was just a girl named Lenore.

A girl of thirteen years old when this story began.

A girl without a family.

A girl without a home.

A girl with just a name and a yearning for magic.

She lived in Squalor. A village that was as malnourished, both physically and emotionally, as its citizens. Its streets were long and sinewy, slithering around in a maze of wood and

stone. There were plenty of dead ends and cul-de-sacs as if the village itself was giving you hope that maybe- *maybe*- you could find freedom if you went left or right but then snatching that hope away from you. The buildings curved and loomed over the streets, their windows watching whatever poor soul or animal the road had tragically lead astray with dead eyes of glass and light. A roaming fog would flow down the cobblestone paths, the breath of Squalor, always wheezing and hacking. The streetlamps glowed with amber, the color of a corpse that had been left out to dry in the sun. It was a terrible place for anyone, let alone a thirteen year old girl.

But finding an escape from terrible places had always been a talent of Lenore's.

She had first learned to pick locks almost by instinct. In fact, picking locks is not quite the way she went about it. *Snapping* locks was more like it. When she was around ten, she had attempted to release herself from Madame Toadstool's Orphanage by using a hair pin and a sewing needle, but when that had failed, she clenched her fists with anger and shut her eyes tight. Then . . .

Snap.

Her fingers moved so quickly that she wasn't even aware she had done so in the first place. She had opened her eyes to see that the window was slowly opening with a creak. She looked behind her to see if any of the other orphans had noticed, but they were still slumbering in their beds. She hoped that whatever they dreamt, it was better than this place. She turned back to the open window and the wind and night sky beckoned her to come out, an invisible audience cheering her on. She smiled and for the first time in her life felt freedom.

The following years, she had spent many nights doing the same. Each time daring herself to go a little bit farther from the orphanage than she had the night before. She would wander the streets and back alleys of the wretched town as if she were exploring caves and mountains. Each new house and shop that she stumbled upon was a new point added to the map of her mind. The world expanded with every right turn taken and every corner revealed.

But tonight she was going to her favorite place on the map. A place that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up with excitement and her feet practically flying off the cobblestone bricks.

Marrow's Antiques was a small shop that was between a barber and a flowery. She looked up and saw that the light above the shop had been snuffed out in the apartment, which meant that Old Man Marrow was asleep. Through the dim glow of the streetlamps, she could see wardrobes and vanities lining the front windows, but she paid them no mind. She heard a call above her and she jumped, looking about to make sure that no one had followed her. It was only an owl that was perched on the roof of the barber shop. It stared at her with its huge unblinking eyes. Lenore wrapped her cloak around her and tilted the hood down in case the animal was judging her.

She reached the front door of the shop and snapped her fingers. A small click of the lock answered her and she opened the door slowly, keeping an eye on the tiny bell above so that she would not reveal herself. She gently closed the door and then made her way through the graveyard of furniture, lamps, stools, rugs, and so on. She smiled, remembering the first time she entered the shop, trying her best not to bump into anything

as if she were traversing a forest of thorns. She went deeper and deeper into the store, almost to the back, until she found the true treasures that awaited her.

Books.

Packed tightly together like an underground tomb were books both old and new, fat and thin, short and tall, all of them beautiful. She breathed in their scents, the spice of words that were held between the covers. The perfume of knowledge that was begging to be read.

Madame Toadstool forbade the orphans to learn how to read beyond the most simple of words because "reading gives children too many ideas." This to Lenore was less of a commandment and more of a challenge. She started off small like reading the words on jars in the kitchen or tags on clothes in the laundry. Then she moved to more advanced literature like signs and recipes. Her self-education grew and grew until she began to read books that Madame Toadstool read to pass the time, lying around her office like moths of paper. They were windows to her, gateways to other places and other minds that were far away from the terrible town of Squalor. She didn't even have to snap her fingers to open them.

Her favorite subject was witchcraft. She adored the histories of the Weird Sisters and their ability to foretell the rise and fall of kings, Baba Yaga and her walking house, or Circe's enchantments that turned warriors into pigs. Tales of witches that had nothing, taking their lives into their own hands to mold their own paths. They defied the rules and spat in the face of convention. While other children of the Hallowland dreamed of falling in love with a Vampire Prince or being the first to conquer the treacherous Nightmare Jungle, Lenore dreamed of

spells, potions, and dancing under the full moon. That was true freedom.

Before she could pick up her latest find, she heard a noise from above. Something or someone was shifting in the apartment upstairs, dust rained down from the ceiling and around her. Lenore covered her nose as best as she could, but still it came. The sneeze was small, but loud enough to make a sound.

"Who's there?" Old Man Marrow's muffled voice said from above.

Lenore quickly looked around and realized that she had trapped herself in a corner of antiques. She went to the floor.

The old skeleton came down the squeaky steps in his nightgown and cap. He had a long wispy white beard and wore half-rim spectacles. In one hand he carried a candle and in the other a cane that Lenore was certain had more dangerous methods than for walking.

"Who's there, I say?" Marrow repeated, his voice like a broken accordion. "If there's a thief in my shop, you'll be sorry!"

She kept herself from laughing at the feeble man's attempts to sound threatening as his joints popped with every step. The laughter pushed against her mouth like an invading army at the gates, but she refused to let it break through. Sweat formed on her brow. *Hold! Hold! Hold!* She felt something on her hand and saw a rat scurry across the surface of her pale fingers. She let out a scream and the gates had been breached.

"I knew it! I knew it!" Old Man Marrow hobbled as quickly as he could to the bookshelves. "Blasted children think they can steal from me!"

There was no time to be subtle now, Lenore got up and ran, throwing whatever she could out of the way. Old vases

shattered on the floor and chairs tumbled as she made her way deeper into the shop. The corridors growing tighter and darker as she ran. She could see the thinnest outline of a door and she bolted towards it. For one brief instant she thought she was free as she opened it and felt the cool night air release the mustiness of the shop. Then she landed on the cobblestone street as she tripped on something.

As her eyes adjusted to the moonlight, she couldn't quite tell what she was looking at. It was long, like a poll of some sort, then her vision snapped into place. It was a broom. Its straw was dark and faded with age, the wood was as black as pitch and traced with sigils all around it. On the handle sat a white raven skull. This was no ordinary broom. This was a *witch's* broom.

Old Man Marrow's cries grew closer and closer as she stared at the broom, shaking her out of her trance. She quickly grabbed it and could think of only one thing to do. She gripped the wood and swung her legs over the thing and was instantly off the ground.

She gasped as her feet lifted off and there she was, floating several inches above the cobblestones. Lenore tilted the broom and she was off like a shot. She was sent zooming down alleyways and streets, letting the wind take her wherever it wanted.

She was doing it! She was really, truly *flying*! Her black hair was streaming behind her, the cloak on her back billowed like a mighty rain cloud around her. Her grip relaxed on the broom and she let the magic take control. She whooped and hollered, cackling like one of the witches she read about in her books. She wasn't quite sure if it was from the wind or the joy, but she felt tears streaming down her face.

She thought that she could try and go a little higher, daring herself to fly with the stars, but something smacked her across the face and she lost balance.

She crashed against a series of haystacks that luckily broke her fall. The broom was sent clattering several feet away from her. Lenore shook her head and blinked, her fists up ready to fight whoever had the gall to steal her freedom from her. It was only an owl that stared back at her. The same owl that stared at her above the barber shop.

"That was rude," she said as she stood up, brushing the hay off of her. She realized that she was behind some warehouse. Boxes, cranes, and pulleys surrounded her.

As if in response to this, the owl turned into something. As the animal grew taller, its feathers revealed its true form underneath, its claws and beak disappeared, Lenore realized it was not some*thing*, but some*one*.

The witch was dressed in black robes emblazoned with planets, stars, and signs of the zodiac, all in gleaming silver sequins as if she was wearing the night sky itself. Her hair was ghost white and pulled tightly behind her head. She had a face that was as pale as the moon and just as old, lined with canyons of time. Her eyes were gray mercury, wisdom shot out of them with the power to turn flesh into stone.

"*That,*" the Witch said in a firm voice, "belongs to *me*."

Lenore could only stare with eyes as wide and jaw as slacked as a dead fish. "You're a. . . you're a. . . *a real live witch!*" She croaked.

"You have impeccable powers of observation for someone so young," the Witch said with a hint of a smile, whether she

was making a joke at Lenore's expense or for her own amusement was unclear.

"Sorry, I just. . ." Lenore quickly remembered herself. "I've never met one before."

"A first time for everything. Now, if you excuse me, I shall be going," the Witch snatched up her broom with an agility that contradicted her age and began to walk down the road.

"Wait!" Lenore said. "A moment! Please!" She ran after the Witch as fast as she could.

"Can I help you?" The Witch stopped.

"I was just wondering, well. . ." Lenore briefly looked at the ground, her words stunted by her nerves.

"Out with it child, I do not have all night."

"Could you teach me magic?" She asked, her eyes shut tightly together to try and soften the blow.

"Ha," the Witch answered without a trace of humor written on her face.

"Oh, please! Witches take apprentices! I read about them! They start learning when they are children!"

"You say this as if I am not aware of history," the Witch sniffed.

"But surely you must understand!" Lenore continued to plead with her. "You were a child once!"

"Unfortunately."

"Then let me learn from you!"

"Why would you want to learn the Art, child?"

"Because it's all that I've ever wanted!" Lenore was shocked by her words, vulnerability shaking her like a cold wind.

"That's not a good enough answer."

"*Why?*" She was beginning to get angry at the old woman now. It reminded her of all the rules Madame Toadstool would recite to her and the other orphans. The whole world was made up of bloody rules!

"Because you cannot go *looking* for magic," the Witch sighed. "It must come looking for *you*."

Lenore paused for a moment, trying to parse out what everything meant. "That sounded like you meant it to be confusing so that I would go away."

"And lo, it failed!" The Witch waved her arms in mock outrage. "Oh, how my spells have forsaken me in my old age!"

Lenore let out a small giggle. She couldn't help herself. Making adults frustrated was delightful to her.

"Child," the Witch bent down to meet her. "You may find the witch that gives you what you want, but I am not that witch. I am too old, too set in my ways, and too bitter to teach a mischievous creature as yourself."

"Thank you," Lenore said, loving being called mischievous.

"Take care, girl. Keep your head in the stars and your feet on the ground," and with that, the Witch draped her cape around herself, the wind howling for a moment. She was gone. Leaving Lenore alone and confused on the street.



2.
THE TOWER

Madame Toadstool was an ogre. If you have yet to meet an ogre, I shall describe this one to you. She was a large creature that resembled an enormous toad. Globe-like eyes bulged out of their sockets, dark and empty as black pearls. A viscus slime secreted from her skin that would leave a sticky trail behind her. One of the orphans, a cyclops named Caroline, was given the unfortunate task of following Madame Toadstool with a bucket and mop to clean after her wherever she went. She wore small oval spectacles over her nose which was dotted with pustules. Every now and then, one of the pustules would burst and mucus would drip down her face with the overwhelming smell of boiled peanuts, at which point she would daintily take a handkerchief from her dress and dab it until the next one burst.

Now, you may be under the impression that all ogres must be as disgusting on the inside as their outward appearance would suggest, this is a gross misunderstanding on your part. Ogres, like every living thing with a brain and a soul, are neither strictly Good or Bad, they merely Are just like the rest of us. But there are always exceptions to the rule. And Madame Toadstool was the biggest exception of them all.

She would begin the day by banging pots and pans. "BREAKFAST TIME, URCHINS!" She would shriek as she clanged two metal pots together. You could always tell how new an orphan was by how many times they would wake up terrified. Some would jump out of bed as if they had just been electrocuted, others would fall out of bed adding a double shock to their system. But as time passed, they would all wake up as if by the crow of a cock.

Lenore being one of the oldest would diligently get out of bed with a fire burning inside of her. The clanging and screaming grating at her with every passing moment. This had only increased after her little run-in with the mysterious witch. It was harder to go through the day when she had met her freedom and it flew away as quickly as smoke from a snuffed out candle.

Before they could have their own breakfast, however, the children would first serve their horrible mistress. They would cook a mighty breakfast in the kitchen of beastly bacon, gargoyle eggs, biscuits with Jersey Devil jam. Loads upon loads, heaps upon heaps, they would pile on a large silver platter. Madame Toadstool's appetite was as big as her greed. She had five husbands, all of them she had eaten.

Once the large platter had been hoisted upon the table at the end of the large dining hall, the orphans would be allowed to sit across long benches and tables with their bowls of gruel porridge. They would sit without a word spoken, the only sound was that of their poor rumbling tummies.

"GRACE!" Madame Toadstool would yell.

"We thank you Madame Toadstool," the children would recite with their heads down, "for giving us a home. We thank you Madame Toadstool for giving us a bed. We thank you

Madame Toadstool for giving us food. We thank you Madame Toadstool for giving us our lives." Lenore droned on, the words had long ago lost all semblance of meaning. They were not like a spell, they had no magic in them. They were not *alive* like the words in books. They were dead words. A prayer of obedience held only by air.

"EAT!" She screamed and they all dug in.

Dug in perhaps is not the right description. The children ate with as much grit as there was in their porridge. Gooey grisly gruel dripped from their spoons and crunched in their mouths with the sound of stone masons applying their craft. Meanwhile, Madame Toadstool would scarf down her breakfast with the zeal and the ecstasy of a crocodile feasting on a boat full of unsuspecting fishermen. Bits of bacon and meat would drop onto the floor, later to be swept up by the orphans and some indulging in crumbs as if they were as fine as caviar. Breakfast was a feast of one and an endurance for most, but that was the least of Lenore's problems.

Once the pots and bowls had been taken care of, it was time for cleaning.

The orphanage was made from large stone and had seemingly endless dark corridors. The children would carry buckets of water and brushes and scrub everywhere from floor to ceiling. Cleaning off muck and grime from the previous day over and over. Swirling their brushes and mops in circles it almost made one dizzy. There were no classes, no recess, no breaks, all that filled their days was cleaning, and cleaning, and more cleaning.

"You snuck out the window again," Caroline whispered to Lenore as she crouched down to mop up some slime behind Madame Toadstool as she basked in the scrubbing.

"And *you* were supposed to be asleep," Lenore said back to her as she was scrubbing a crack in the wall.

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone," the cyclops girl winked her eye. Lenore liked Caroline, she was kind to her and they both took kindness wherever they could find it. But they were not friends, exactly. One could never have friendships in a place like this. A place as dark and as cruel as a vault. "But I am a bit jealous, to tell you the truth. Could you take me with you next time?"

"We could both get sent to the Tower if I did," Lenore shuddered to think.

It had appeared that Caroline had dropped the subject, but she could no longer contain herself and she asked. "What was it like out there? I simply must know!"

"Beautiful," Lenore sighed, remembering the air brushing against her skin. "It was beautiful. You won't believe who I ran into!" She smiled, just as giddy as she was when finding a new book.

"Who?" Caroline's eye widened, desperate to hear of someone other than the same old faces she saw every day. But just as Lenore was about to tell her of the mysterious and wonderful witch that she met the night before, two sounds startled them all.

The first was Madame Toadstool yelling "BIRD! BIRD!" At the top of her lungs, waving her arms in distress. The second came the screeching of the bird in question. All of the children

looked up, alarmed that their tedious symphony of lathering and brushing was interrupted.

An owl had flown in from an open window that a minotaur boy had accidentally opened while washing it. To most in the room, it appeared to be an average owl that had wandered in and was now caught off guard by the sudden commotion. But to you, I, and Lenore it looked like the very same owl that had turned into the witch.

"KILL IT! KILL IT!" Madame Toadstool continued to scream for the ogre had a debilitating phobia of birds of any kind all her life. A fear that followed her ever since a grackle had pecked her on the head when she was small after devouring its whole nest.

The minotaur boy who had caused the scene swatted it with a mop, trying to get it out as quickly as possible, terrified of what his mistress would do to him if he failed yet again. The bird went buzzing and whirling about, avoiding the wet noodles of the mop. All the while Lenore gazed up at it with confusion and shock. How did it know that she lived here? Why had it come back?

The owl finally went out the window and the minotaur boy slammed it shut and locked it as quickly as he could. "So sorry, Madame!" He said shaking. "It'll never-never happen again!"

"If it does you'll be sent straight to the Tower!" Madame Toadstool scowled at him, clutching her chest. "My heart, my poor, poor heart! You could have killed me! You hear that children? If *any one* of you little brats makes a slip up like that pathetic bull cowering over there, then you'll kill me! You'll have no home! No one to take care for you! You'll be at the whim of the outside world! UNDERSTAND?"

"Yes, Madame Toadstool," they all said, though some of them hoped one would be brave enough to make the same mistake twice. The minotaur boy bowed his head, his tears mixing in with the water in his bucket.

"What were you going to tell me?" Caroline turned back to Lenore.

"Nothing. . . " Lenore mumbled, going back to work. "Nothing at all."

Dinner was the same as breakfast. Afterwards, they all gathered around Madame Toadstool and followed her as she slithered, soaked, and licked every inch of the orphanage with her slime. This was the same practice that she had been doing for years and years. Every night, she would dirty away all of the cleaning that they had worked themselves to the bone for hours before. They were all forced to watch her soil all that hard work like waves of filth coming in on a beach.

"You see, children," she told them after she had secreted a pustule on the last stone that she could find. "I do this to remind you of how unfair life is. I take the time out of my busy schedule every single night to remind you that no matter how much you try, no matter how hard you work, life will always wash it away. This is a very important lesson for when you become adults. Suffering builds character, after all. Aren't you grateful for being in my care?"

"Yes, Madame Toadstool," they all replied through false smiles.

"Thank you," Madame Toadstool sniffed, wiping a tear from her eye. "Thank you so much."

And so the days and nights continued as they always had. Awakening to the thunderclap of pots and the wailing of

Madame Toadstool, sleeping with only their dreams for refuge. Breakfast of slop, dinner of slop. Cleaning and scrubbing all day only to have it replaced with slime by bedtime. Lenore's existence was made further deplorable by that accursed owl.

The menace no longer dared to enter the orphanage lest it be struck by a mop or worse. Instead it merely sat outside on a dry branch watching Lenore, following her with its enormous eyes, taunting her as she went about her life.

Until one day, her patience had reached its end.

As she sat at the table, eating her dinner, she stared back at the owl as it watched through the window. She held the beast's gaze as if daring it to blink first. Lenore thought about how cruel the bird was for throwing her off that magic broom. How cruel it was for turning into a witch in front of her, gloating its powers. How cruel it was to be denied her one chance at freedom, her one chance to finally have a life that was not beholden to such a horrible woman as Madame Toadstool. How cruel it was to just sit there outside when all the owl had to do was cast a spell and all would be right. How cruel it was that her escape was only blocked by an ordinary glass window.

"*Why do you mock me?"* Lenore cried out, standing up and slamming her fists on the table. She glared at the owl and breathed so hard she could not hear the dining room. Then it dawned on her that the silence wasn't coming from her mind.

All around her the children stared at her, stunned and shocked by her outburst.

"How DARE you interrupt MY dinner!" Madame Toadstool shuddered with rage as she sat with a mound of food in front of her.

"I'm-I'm sorry, Madame Toadstool," Lenore said, slowly coming back to her senses. "I was talking to the owl!"

"What owl?" Her mistress sneered at her.

Lenore looked out the window and saw that the owl had flown. "It-it-it was right there!" She thrusted a finger at the window.

"Lies, lies, and more lies! Perhaps you should be called Lying Lenore!" Madame Toadstool chuckled at her own joke. "There is only one place fit for liars!"

Lenore's blood turned to ice. Her heart skipped a beat. *Please not there*.

"TO THE TOWER!" The ogre announced and stood up from her seat, grabbing Lenore as quickly as she could.

"Tower! Tower! Tower!" The children cried as was tradition. Though their voices were full of triumph, their eyes held pity and sorrow for their fellow orphan.

"No, Mistress! Please, not the Tower! *Please!*" Lenore begged as Madame Toadstool held her with a slimy hand and dragged her out of the hall.

"This will teach you to mind your manners!" She scolded as she pulled the poor girl up a flight of winding stairs. Up and up she went until they reached a large door that was ancient with wood and iron. She threw open the door and tossed Lenore inside.

"Think upon your sins! It builds character!" Madame Toadstool slammed the door behind her and locked it with a key from her dress.

Lenore pounded on the door, weeping until she collapsed. The room was about as small as a well. That was the torture of it all, of course. No light. No food. No time. Only you. Solitude

at the highest peak of Madame Toadstool's Orphanage could drive anyone mad. She finally slept with only her tears to comfort her.



There was a glow in the darkness. A flickering red orange that had no flame. It casted shadows on walls that did not exist. Lenore looked deeper, but there were no signs of where she was. Only the phantom fire that signaled she was in a space at all.

A figure walked towards her. She felt it before she saw it. The shadow grew in shape but not form. It was a woman, her features invisible. The figure drew nearer and nearer, the fire glowing brighter shaping a room that she had never seen before. The woman's identity was almost revealed, only a few more steps and the riddle would be solved. Closer. . . . closer. . .

Lenore woke up in true darkness. A darkness that was blacker than any night. It was thick and still. The blackness of reality.

She sighed, wanting to be back in her dream life again. Mysterious at is was, it was far better than the waking world. Her dream held possibilities, questions, magic. All this darkness had to offer was despair and certainty. Certain that she would be trapped in the Tower for however long Madame Toadstool saw fit. Certain that she would never have a chance to smell Old Man Marrow's collection of wonderful books again. Certain that she would grow old and die in this prison.

Certainty pulled her down like being in a lake with stones in her pocket, never allowing her to come up for air ever again.

She heard a sound which surprised her considering the only thing she could hear was her breathing. It was the soft rustling of leaves blowing in a high wind. No, it was rougher than that, metal beads shifting in a bucket. No, it was not man-made, but natural. The sound of sand flowing from an hour-glass. The sand grew louder and louder until she was certain of only one thing. She was certain that the walls were moving.



3.
MOTHER MIDNIGHT

A speck of brightness penetrated the dark. Moonlight no doubt, as small as the tip of your finger. Lenore watched as the pinpoint grew larger and larger, the bricks of the wall turning to sand as it widened. As the sand cascaded and stopped, leaving a hole in the Tower, she saw the Witch in front of her on her broom.

The Witch stepped off of the broom and onto the ledge, then into the Tower itself. She looked around with curiosity. "Strange place to keep a child, don't you think?" She smiled.

"Why are you here?" Lenore asked, frustrated. "To torment me further?"

"Torment you?" The Witch said with furrowed brows. "How do you mean?"

"The owl! I saw you in the corridor! Outside of the window!" She fumed. "It's because of *you* that I am in here!"

"I did no such thing," the Witch lifted her head up with pride. "I believe that was all Madame Toadstool's doing."

"You made me look like a fool!"

"Once again, this was all her fault. Neither you nor I are to blame for something that she chose to do of her own free will."

"The least you could do is turn her into a slug," Lenore frowned, miffed that her anger had been misplaced.

"I have a far better alternative," the Witch lifted her hand and the broom came through the hole and into her grasp. "I have come to accept your offer."

"Offer?" Lenore's eyes brightened for a moment, her heart beating at what might come next.

"Your offer to become my apprentice, of course. I am Mother Midnight," the Witch bowed her head in reverence, "and I have decided that you are fit to begin your training."

Lenore's mouth dropped open. She was just as stunned as she was when she first ran into Mother Midnight in the alley.

"That's why I watched you," Mother Midnight said, reading the shock on the girl's face. "I had my doubts at first, I found you to be a bit too. . . *eager* for such an undertaking. But over time I saw it as clearly as the full moon."

"What did you see?"

"Spark," Mother Midnight's eyes shimmered with the word. "The spark of possibility. That is the tell-tale sign of a witch ready to be born." She held out her hand. "But that is ultimately up for you to decide."

Lenore looked at the old woman's hand, the color of bone in the moonlight, and time stood still. This must have been the easiest decision she had ever made in her short life, but something was holding her back. As terrible as it was, the orphanage had been the only home that she had known. And home, no matter where it was, was still home. She would leave it for the rest of her days and embark into the unknown. When she would fantasize about becoming a witch, the unknown felt vast and endless like an ocean. Now, with her dream as real as the

hand that presented itself to her, the unknown felt like a mist. Obscure, dense, and mysterious. What else was she to do? Either stay in the Tower and clean slime until she dropped dead or embrace the future.

She took the witch's hand.

"Excellent," Mother Midnight whispered and got onto her broom. "Get on."

"I don't think there is enough room for me," Lenore wondered as she moved to the side, but then she saw that the broom extended itself to accommodate her. She swung her leg around.

"Hold on to me," Mother Midnight said and Lenore wrapped her arms around her waist. The witch kicked her feet off and they were sent flying out the window.

Though Lenore had flown before, a gasp let out of her once she realized how high she was. Down below were the flicker of streetlamps and roofs, making Squalor look like a village made for dolls. As they soared higher and higher, the Tower grew smaller. Her eyes filled with tears, not just from the altitude, but from the reality of the escape crashing into her. She was never going to see that place again. No more nights of sneaking out or robbing Old Man Marrow's shop. She was really, truly, free.

The air grew chillier as they ascended. She wrapped her arms tighter around Mother Midnight's torso. The clouds swirled and bulged around them to the point that the stars were no longer visible. Only the faint glow of the moon acted as their north star in the night air.

"How do you know where we are going?" Lenore broke the silence.

"I don't," Mother Midnight called back. "But this does," she rapped her knuckles on the raven skull at end of the handle. "It always knowns where home is."

Home. . . or at least Mother Midnight's home, began to make itself visible several moments after she spoke. It was difficult to make out at first, a small candle glowing through a window was visible miles downward. Then as they got closer and closer, Lenore could see that it was a small cottage in a wood.

As they touched down, the wood surrounded them in twisted branches and dark leaves. Having never stepped foot outside of Squalor, this was Lenore's first time seeing a tree save for some pictures or a midnight stroll in the local park. Unlike the mundane trees of said park, this was wild and untamed. The branches reaching for the sky in angles of ecstasy, the trunks so twisted and bent that she could make out various faces and animals hidden within the bark, the roots weaving snake-like out of the ground. They were all so beautiful. The perfect environment for a witch in training.

"Come on, then," Mother Midnight encouraged her as she walked to the door.

"But Mother Midnight," Lenore said. "How are we ever going to fit in there?" Her question was not without merit. The cottage itself was made of planks with one or two windows covered in dust and cobwebs. It tilted to one side as if standing straight would force it to collapse. The chimney, if one were to call it such a thing, was built from a cone-shaped hat with a wide brim A hole was cut out of the top to leave a thin trail of smoke to whisper out of it. To say that the house could shelter the two of them would be a generous conclusion.

"Ah, but you see, my apprentice, when it comes to magic nothing is what it seems," Mother Midnight smiled and pulled out a ring of keys from her robes and unlocked the front door.

As she walked in, Lenore had to shield her eyes from the bright glow that emanated from the chamber. She slowly let her eyes adjust and she saw hundreds of candles glittering in an enormous gothic cathedral. Ornate sculptures of angels and demons were carved in pillars of white marble. Pointed arches and flying buttresses, decorated everywhere she looked. Stained glass windows dramatized the lives of witches in red, purple, and orange. High above her was a fresco of the cosmos. The stars, planets, and constellations were laid out on the arched ceiling.

"Impressive, isn't it?" A new voice spoke. Lenore turned her gaze from the ceiling to her level expecting to see a person, when in fact, it was a goat.

"Lenore, this is my familiar, Djali," Mother Midnight said as she placed the broom on an alter. "Djali, this is Lenore, my new apprentice."

"Nice to meet you," Lenore smiled and waved at the goat.

"The pleasure is all mine, young lady," Djali bowed his head slightly. His fur was a mixture of gray and white and his horns were rough with age. A small wispy beard dangled at the end of his mouth. "Since our dear Mother Midnight told me of your potential apprenticeship, I have taken the liberty of preparing you a supper." He turned around and made his way to the kitchen, his hooves echoing against the vast walls of the cathedral.

Lenore followed him into a kitchen that was long and decorated in white tiles. Shelves were filled with jars of eyeballs,

birds feet, bat wings, and other ingredients common to Hollowland cuisine. She took a seat at a stool on the island where the cutting board was. Djali opened the oven with his mouth and, after filling his jaws with a cloth, pulled out a pie. He placed it on the board.

"Tuck in, my dear," the goat said, "this is my famous black apple pie."

The pie was steaming and the crust was cooked golden. Lenore hadn't eaten anything in almost twenty-four hours, so she grabbed a fork and tucked in she did. As she tasted the sweetness of the gooey apples inside she said, "this is *delicious*!"

"Thank you very much, indeed," pride shimmered in Djali's rectangular eye.

"How is everything?" Mother Midnight asked as she walked into the kitchen.

"Still got it," the goat winked at her.

"When do I get a familiar?" Lenore said as she ate. "All witches have one don't they?"

"It depends on the witch. Some prefer solitude, but I prefer the company," Mother Midnight said as she petted Djali on the head.

"I want a lizard!"

"I'm afraid that is not how it works, my apprentice," Mother Midnight chuckled. "The bond between a witch and her familiar is born out of need, not want."

"Well, I *need* a lizard, then," Lenore wiped the last of the sticky blackness from her chin with a nearby towel.

"All in good time, I assure you," Djali said. "We weren't the best of friends to begin with, now were we?" He nuzzled his head playfully against Mother Midnight's arm.

"How did you two meet?"

"That is a long story. One for another night. Now," Mother Midnight clapped her hands together. "It is time for bed."

"Now?" Lenore said, disappointed. "But I just arrived!"

"Your training begins tomorrow and you will need your rest," Mother Midnight patted her gently on the back. "Let me show you to your room."

Lenore hopped off of the stool and took her plate over to the sink.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that," Djali said.

"What do you mean?" Lenore asked.

"The dishes. I'll clean them up for you," Daji told her blankly.

The thought of someone offering, to clean up after her struck Lenore like a thunderbolt. Tears welled behind her eyes at the kindness of it. Out of all of the wonderful things that had happened that night, this small act would stay with her for the rest of her life. "Good night, Djali," she said, petting his head.

"Good night, young lady," touching his wet nose against her hand and took her plate in his mouth.

Lenore followed Mother Midnight up a small flight of stairs and down a corridor. The walls were lined with candles that lit doors that were as beautifully carved as the rest of the cathedral. Mother Midnight opened one of them and lead her in.

The room would not look like much to you or I- was cozy with a small bed, a wardrobe, and a desk- no bigger than a large carriage. But to Lenore it was a lavish suite. She jumped up on the bed a couple of times and landed on the soft mattress with ease.

"Do you like it?" Mother Midnight asked.

"Oh, it's *delightful*," Lenore said as she got underneath the fresh covers.

"Good. If you need me or Djali, we shall be down the hall. Sleep well, my apprentice," the witch smiled and closed the door.

"You too," Lenore yawned. As she stared up at the ceiling, watching the moonlight from a small window shine against the animal bones that hung from bits of string, for the first time in her life she dozed off to sleep without a single ache in her heart.



4.
LAW AND ORDER

Chief Inspector Crowbar looked at himself in the mirror with as much scrutiny as he did everyone else. His beak had been polished, his black feathers glistened with oil. He stretched his wings to make sure that they were straight. The long, dark double-breasted coat that he wore had been pressed and its gold buttons were still shining. He nodded his head with satisfaction, he placed a monocle on the right side of face as always, it caught the morning light and glimmered.

Corvid City was located just several miles away from Mother Midnight's cottage. It was a city made of trees. Its buildings, houses, churches, and all were nestled within the branches of the mighty wood. Connected by bridges, the city was a wonder to behold. Its citizens were Corvids, a person that is neither human nor bird but somewhere in the middle. These things are indeed unique, but something more strange was held within its branches and that was the Law.

With notable exceptions such as the Vampire Court or the kingdom of Fairy, the Hallowland has no body of government. *To thine own self be true* was the unspoken creed of every monster, witch, and ghost of the Hallowland. As long as you refrained from intentionally hurting others and lived an authen-

tic life that was true to your heart, there was no need for a ruler of any kind.

Corvid City, on the other hand, had decided that was not to their liking. Given that the city itself was made out of a forest and thus had limitations, the trees themselves could not hold the weight of its population. So the Crowbar family, one of the wealthiest in all of Corvid, proposed that it would divide the city in half. The branches would hold the rich, the adored, and the most beautiful. Whereas the ground would belong to the poor, the sick, and the infirm.

This was met with a resounding yes from the wealthy and anger from the poor. To keep the balance, the wealthy created the Law: a series of strict rules that would be enforced by Inspectors by any means necessary.

And so the Law was passed down from generation to generation to when our story is set.

Crowbar went downstairs to greet his dutiful wife for breakfast. It was a plate of banshee berries and a glass of swamp juice, just the way he liked it every morning. He opened the latest edition of the *Daily Cawing* and browsed through it with a keen eye for detail. Finances were good, crime was at an all time low- thanks to him and his Inspectors, of course- and the weather was predicted to be steady. He glanced at a wanted ad for a missing orphan girl and made a mental note of it. The girl reminded him of his own son who had left for school before he came

down. The poor boy, having to live with such a horrible disfigurement. His pity melted away like butter as he shut the paper, kissed his wife goodbye and left.

As he walked across bridges to the courthouse , he nodded and responded politely to his fellow Corvids, but Chief Inspector Crowbar was not *there*. That is to say, he was lost inside his mind. He was too busy going down the list of Laws that he had signed into action the day before to notice how the branches of the trees wrapped and twisted their way around the city, even creeping their way through windows. He was too busy thinking about if the buttons on his shirt was done all the way to notice a friendly greeting or an anxious gaze. He was too busy thinking about how many berries were in his breakfast and if they were in fact too many berries to remember a time when his marriage felt more like love than obligation. Chief Inspector Crowbar was always too busy to live a life that was not written down in stone first.

He reached the courthouse and, in front of the white columns of the enormous building, stood a Corvid. He was centered on a box, a living wind-up doll gesticulating his arms and ripping out pages from the Book Of The Law, babbling some claptrap about the institution behind him. What concerned Crowbar was that a crowd of curious onlookers had begun to congregate. They were a bit *too* curious for his liking, but he was relieved when a squad of Inspectors came out of the entrance and down the steps.

"We have lived for far too long under tyranny!" The Corvid cried. "We in our lavish houses and sculpted ballrooms while they," he pointed down, "the so-called fledglings live in poverty and misery! All because of arcane standards written hundreds of-" he stopped when he noticed Crowbar in front of him. "Good morning, Chief Inspector," he said steadily.

"Law 5, states that opposition against the Law is treason," Crowbar recited, picking up one of the torn pages.

"Of course it does!" The Corvid chuckled. "Of course the Law prevents it from speaking out against them!"

"Law 42 states that destruction of the Book Of The Law is illegal," he said picking up another page.

"They print hundreds of these a day!" The Corvid held up his torn book. "What is one copy compared to another?"

"Law 272 states that it is illegal to use boxes for political means," Crowbar tapped the box with one of his talons, making the Corvid flinch.

"What are your orders, sir?" a large Inspector named Broadbeak strode up to his superior , his hands on his belt.

"Arrest him," Crowbar replied.

The Inspectors took out iron shackles and pulled the Corvid down from his box. Crowbar simply walked past them and up the stairs.

As the Corvid continued to protest, he shouted out, "if he wasn't your son, that boy of yours would be rotting away with the rest of them down there!"

Crowbar stopped.

A piercing hot rage went through him like a lightning bolt. The feathers on the back of his neck bristled. He turned around and met the eye of the transgressor. Though the eye of the Corvid showed defiance and fear, he saw no soul. He only saw an object. A clumsy, useless object that was waiting to be smashed to pieces.

"Law 592 states that any threat posed to the family of the Law is punishable by death. Execute him," Crowbar ordered.

The Inspectors diligently pulled out the wooden clubs from their belts and began to beat the Corvid. Bones cracked, feathers flew in the air, and red splashes colored the white steps of the courthouse.

His protests turned to screams.

His screams turned to pleas.

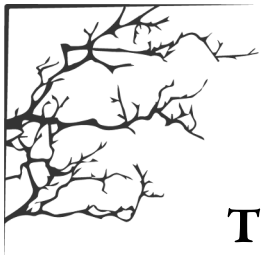
His pleas turned to moans.

His moans turned to dull whimpers.

His whimpers turned to silence.

The crowd dispersed, going about their day with obedience while the Inspectors disposed of the body. Crowbar went up the steps and into the courthouse.

It was only until he reached his office that he noticed the blood on his coat.



5.
THE ART OF MAGIC

Lenore woke up to the sound of her own breathing. There were no pots clanging, no sign of Madame Toadstool anywhere. For the first time that she could remember, she had greeted the morning as herself. Happiness did not come to her at first, she was most unsettled by this change of routine. But then she was unsettled even further when she thought of something else. She was unsettled by the fact that safety felt so strange to her.

It felt as if she had just jumped off a cliff and was waiting to hit the bottom. She had always awoke alert and bracing for impact, hitting the bottom every morning. But now she was floating. A lighter than air sensation that would take some time to get used to. She shut her eyes and then opened them again, testing if it was a dream. The room was still there, the gray light of day peeking through the small window above her, the bones continued to slowly waltz over her head on strings. She touched her face and felt her palm against her cheek, since she could not feel anything with her hands in her dream, that was proof enough for her that she was awake no matter how strange it felt.

She got out of bed and opened the wardrobe that sat against the wall. She was stunned to find various dresses and clothes made of black velvet and silk. She snatched one off of a hanger greedily and placed it to her face, breathing in the smell of freshly done laundry. A scent that she had only truly taken in when washing Madame Toadstool's slimy clothes. She took off the rags that she and every orphan had worn and replaced them with the clothes. The caress of the fabric against her skin made goosebumps on her arms. Her face shined back at her in polished black pearl shoes as she buckled them on.

When she reached down stairs, she heard the familiar sound of beastly bacon sizzling and the smell of cage-free gargoyle eggs in the air.

"Good morning," Mother Midnight said, helping Djali carry plates to the kitchen table. "How did you sleep?"

"Wonderful," Lenore said with such delight that she surprised herself once again.

"Excellent. Now, tuck in, you're going to need your energy for today," Mother Midnight sat down and began to eat her own breakfast with poise and grace.

At first, Lenore was confused as to what she should do next. She had never been this close to such a fine meal before. Such a delicacy as a well-made breakfast was only available to her mistress, of course, so she felt almost rude for wanting to enjoy it. But this breakfast was meant for her, gargoyle eggs and beastly bacon were so common to children of the Hallowland that it was almost a given. But to Lenore, this was a feast fit for a queen. She took her time, savoring the warmth and the flavors as she ate. Closing her eyes every now and then and letting her other senses do the work for her. It was bliss.

Lenore let out a sigh and placed her fork down when she was done. "What is our first lesson of the day?"

"Walking," Mother Midnight got up from the table.

"What is so magical about walking?" Lenore followed her out of the kitchen. "I do it all the time."

"Ah, but have you walked *mindfully*?" Mother Midnight said as she took her broom off of the altar. It turned into a long staff. "Have you ever walked with your very heart and soul?" She spoke with the passion of a poet.

"No," Lenore replied, thinking that what the old woman was saying was pure nonsense.

Mother Midnight deflated and rolled her eyes. "We're going for a walk, dear!" She called to the kitchen.

"Miss you, already!" Djali called back, the clatter of dishes being washed followed his voice.

Mother Midnight opened the door to the cottage and they stepped outside. It was gray and filled with the mist of early morning. The branches of the forest around them poked out here and there in the dense fog.

"Come along then," her teacher said. "We're going treasure hunting," she along with her staff went down a trail.

"Treasure?" Lenore piped up and took up speed. "Where?"

"You will see," Mother Midnight smiled. "Now, something that must be understood is that magic is not the same as mathematics. The former is felt whereas the latter is studied. Magic is an art. It cannot be understood by logic and numbers."

"But where does it come from?"

"It does not come from anywhere, it simply is. Magic is everywhere and in every thing for those who want to look for it."

"Like in the books that I read?" Lenore smiled, hoping she was on to something.

"No," Mother Midnight said. "The knowledge of the heart is in no book and is not to be found in the mouth of a teacher, but grows out of you like the green seed from the dark earth."

"Then why am I following you then?" She said sharply, annoyed by the witch's absurd reasoning.

Mother Midnight stoped abruptly and turned to her. She crouched down, so that she could look at her in the face. "I am merely a guide. All I can do is point you in the right direction. What you must do is find the magic in *here*," she jabbed a finger at the girl's chest. "Everyone is born with magic. Everyone changes the world by being in it. Whether those changes are big or small. The task is to find the magic within and use it responsibly," her silver eyes stared back at her with such intensity that they seemed to be part of the mist itself. "We are only given a limited amount of time in this world, child. *Never* take it for granted."

"Sorry," Lenore said quietly.

As they walked for a little while more, she wondered what kind of treasure they would find. Would it be gold? Jewels? She decided to keep her mind off of it by asking another question.

"If magic exists in everyone," she began, hoping she wasn't treading on thin ice, "then why isn't every one a witch?"

"Witch, werewolf, vampire, magic takes many shapes, but magic is still there," Mother Midnight replied evenly. "Witches are no better than any one else. We just use it more directly than others do."

"Do they know that they can do magic?"

"No, they call it by another name. Intuition. Coincidence. Talent. We are most aware of our magic when we are children. That is why apprenticeships in witchcraft start so young."

"Why do children know more about it than adults?" Lenore's brows furrowed.

"Because they are not yet clouded by outside forces. When we are born, the world is new to us. Filled with possibilities. It is only until we are older that we are influenced by others. Be it through our education, our family, or the environment that we are in. Life soon becomes a series of tasks to achieve instead of adventures to explore."

Lenore thought about how awful Madame Toadstool was and wondered if she had always been that way. Was she always the greedy, loud, cruel person that she grew up to be or was she bullied as a child? Did she have bad parents? Was she an orphan herself? She considered that if she had never met Mother Midnight, would she have grown up to be like Madame Toadstool? Would every day of scrubbing off slime from the stone walls of the orphanage erode away her sense of wonder and love for magic with every passing year?

They continued their walk in silence. Lenore's curiosity of Mother Midnight's treasure grew with every passing minute. The mist cleared with time and she saw vultures and bats hovering overhead, the moon faintly outlined in the gray sky. The twisted branches of the trees swayed a little, greeting them as they passed. Little chupacabras and insects scurried across the ground, avoiding their steps.

They walked for nearly an hour when they came upon a steep hill. Lenore huffed and puffed as she climbed, amazed

that someone as old as Mother Midnight could traverse the terrain with a stride of a woman far younger.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Mother Midnight beamed at the ground on top of the hill.

"What is?" Lenore breathed out, wiping sweat from her brow. "Where's the treasure?" She looked around, trying to find something gloriously shiny or at the very least an X that marked the spot in which it was buried.

"There," Mother Midnight pointed to something with her staff. "The stone."

"What is so special about the rock?" Lenore asked in almost a whisper, taken by the mystery of it.

"Do no call it a rock," Mother Midnight scolded her. "Stones are very sensitive despite appearing hard. Look at its markings."

Lenore bent over closer, only seeing bits of age and spots on the stone.

"Don't they look like a crescent moon and the stars?" Her teacher asked.

"I don't see it," Lenore squinted. "What makes this rock- sorry- this *stone* a treasure?"

"Those markings. I've never seen a stone like it," Mother Midnight smiled.

Lenore stood up, the sense of mystery faded and dull reality settled in. "You mean we walked all this way to see a stone?"

"Indeed," Mother Midnight looked down at her, still smiling.

"A *bloody stone*?" Lenore fumed. "What was all that talk of treasure, then?"

"This *is* treasure. We are all treasure if you look through a magical perspective. We all contain things that are unique to us. Just like that stone."

"You could have just told me that!" Lenore cried. "I didn't have to walk all this way just to be told that I'm special! We could've flown here!" She whacked her hand against the staff.

"You wouldn't have believed me," Mother Midnight replied calmly.

"You're a witch!" Lenore flailed her arms about. "*Of course* I would have believed the stone is special!"

"I was not talking about the stone."

Lenore made a sound like a rioting tea kettle. She jumped up and down, waving her arms around her. She grumbled and growled, a wild thing on top of a cliff while her teacher looked on patiently. She concluded her interpretive dance of fury with crossed arms and heavy breathing.

"What is that?" Lenore jabbed a finger out in front of her.

"That is Corvid City," Mother Midnight answered, looking in that direction. "It is where the Corvids live. The top of the trees is where the wealthy reside whereas the bottom are the discarded. Revolting policy if you were to ask me."

Lenore wondered how the trees supported all of those huge buildings of stone and houses in their branches until she looked down. She could just barely make out the glimmer of camp fires and shadows moving in the depths of the woods below. It reminded her of the orphanage and a lump formed in her throat at the thought that there could be a child like her down there.

"Come, my apprentice," Mother Midnight turned back with a swish of her robes. "We shall continue your studies when we get back home."

Before Lenore followed Mother Midnight back down the hill, she let out her frustration by kicking the stone off of the cliff. A part of her was uncertain if she heard a small cry as it fell or if that was the wind.



Once they had returned to the cottage and Lenore rested her aching feet, they met back in the kitchen. Mother Midnight took out a teacup and placed it in front of Lenore.

"Move the cup," she said. Lenore lifted her hand towards the cup, but her teacher stoped her. "With your mind."

"How?" Lenore asked. "I just started today."

"That is why we are starting with an easy lesson. Look," Mother Midnight lifted her hand up as if she was going to grab the cup, but it moved on its own and into her hand. "Simple, really."

"Simple?"

"You know how to unlock a window, yes?"

"Sure I do. But I just *knew* how to do that."

"And you already know how to move the cup," Mother Midnight leaned forward. "We witches have a creed: *As within, so without. As above, so below. As the universe, so the soul.* It means that everything is connected. Everything we do, say, think, feel, is connected to the world around us. You are not moving the cup towards you, just as you did not unlock the

window. A part of you knew that you and the window were made of the same energy. So you had a conversation with it. You used the language of your mind instead of your mouth to dance with it. Try again." She placed the cup back down in front of her.

Lenore lifted her hand up like she saw Mother Midnight do before, but the old witch stopped her again.

"No, no. That is how I communicate with the cup. Think about how you communicated with the window. Your magic is like your fingerprint. It only belongs to you."

Lenore thought about it, then remembered. She snapped her fingers and at the same time told the cup to move with the voice inside her head.

It shuddered as if it were frightened, then stopped.

"Why didn't it come to me?" Lenore asked.

"Because you told it to," Mother Midnight said. "Don't command it. This is not about forcing something to happen, but letting it happen."

Lenore sat back in her chair and thought about it, confused. She leaned forward this time with her elbow on the table. She snapped her fingers and asked it to move.

The cup was sent flying, nearly hitting Djali's horns, and crashed against the wall.

Lenore let out a heavy sigh. "I can't do it. It's impossible."

"Everything is impossible when you do not know what *is* possible," Mother Midnight said, grabbing another cup from the cupboard. "Remember, magic is all about imagination. It is not about doing, but being. See it. Play with it."

Lenore stared at the cup again. She studied the blue pattern on it, how it was chipped on one of its edges. She stared at it

for so long that it no longer looked like a cup, but an animal of some sort. A living thing made of porcelain and paint, but a living thing nonetheless. A thing that had soul. A thing that was no longer mundane, but enchanted. Animated. She then wondered what it would be like to *be* the cup. To live in a cupboard for most of the time. To feel a tickle as tea was poured into you. To feel the hard shell of your body, instead of the soft fleshy bits.

Lenore lifted her hand again and snapped her fingers, this time thinking about how fun it would be to have a conversation with the cup.

The tea cup jumped off the table and landed in Lenore's hands.

"That's a good start," Mother Midnight smiled at her as Djali swept up the mess behind her.



6.
TOBIAS

Tobias Crowbar always did his best to not look anyone in the eye. It is said that the eyes are the windows to the soul. If that is true, then Tobias never met a joyful soul in his short life. Whether it be children or adults, Tobias' appearance was greeted with gasps, shock, pity, mocking laughter, sadness, or contempt. Reactions that he had all grown used to by the age of four let alone fourteen. However long it had been, the sting was still there. The sting that comes with looking as he did.

He was born human. There was no omen to warn his parents, no signs that they could gather from the stars or from their biology, it simply was. That was perhaps the hardest pill for his mother and father to swallow. There was nothing and no one to blame for his disfigurement. Nothing to revenge against, no one to place on trial. His birth had simply been a horrible twist of fate.

Tobias even avoided himself in the mirror as much as he could. While combing his black hair- the only part of him that even slightly resembled a Corvid- to brushing his teeth- using a special device made for him by a doctor- he would focus on those things alone and not on his face. He would get a lump in his throat whenever he caught a glance at his terrible hazel eyes instead of beautiful black pearls, his awful nose and putrid pink

lips instead of a strong and sharp beak, or his ears growing out of the side of his head like fungi instead of majestic feathers.

When he was small, he would wake and hope that he had grown feathers, a beak, or even wonderful wings. But then he would look in sorrow at the ten naked fingers that were still attached to his hands.

There was some discussion of what to do about his strange mutation. Magical transformation from a witch? Relocating to a more human populated area? No, neither of those options would do. According to his father, "you are a Crowbar and you will always *be* a Crowbar no matter what you look like."

This appeared to be a statement of approval, but a part of Tobias thought it was more of a statement of defense. He was a Crowbar not because of his affliction, but in spite of it.

And so that had been Tobias' life up until this point in our story. A life of not just avoiding other people's gazes, but his own. Seeing himself was just too frightening for him, so he shut up and shrunk down. Whether it be strange looks or snickering from his classmates, he did not react to them. He stayed as still and quiet as the trees that held Corvid City in their branches.



He was walking home from school when he spotted something that caught his eye. It was a poster on a wall advertising a missing girl. At the bottom of it was the name and address for Madame Toadstool's Orphanage from a town called Squalor. But that was not what grabbed his attention. It was the drawing of the girl, one who was around his age. The artist

of the sketch gave no life to her with his pencil. The missing girl stared back at him with empty eyes. The girl was human like him, but he was transfixed by the drawing not just due to the similarity. He couldn't put words to it, a feeling, a want, a *need* to meet someone like him for a change.

Tobias looked around to see if anyone was watching, and since the coast was clear, he tore off the poster from its nail and folded it into the pocket of his coat.

As he continued his walk home, he spotted two Corvid boys looking at him. They exchanged looks and pointed, snickering.

Keep moving, he told himself as he picked up pace, *maybe they won't bother you if you keep moving.*

He was wrong. The boys quickly flew over to him and blocked his way. "Where are you off to?" One of them sneered.

"I'm going home," Tobias mumbled, trying to get around them.

"Not so fast," the other placed a hand to Tobias' chest. "I know you."

"We- we don't go to school together," Tobias' stammered.

"His pa's the Chief Inspector, Lawrence," the other boy nudged his counterpart in the shoulder. "Better be careful with him. He might tell on us."

"He's not going to squawk," Lawrence sneered. "Look at him. He's shaking, Bruce."

The two boys moved closer, forcing Tobias back. "He doesn't even have a beak to squawk with," Bruce said and they both laughed.

"Please-please don't hurt me," Tobias continued backwards, the shadows of the boys swallowing him with every step.

"Oh, we're not going to hurt you. Right, Bruce?"

"Never," said Lawrence. "We're just going to put you in your place."

"Where's that?" Tobias nearly screamed as his back hit a railing. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the boys had locked him into a corner of a tree. The huge branches loomed over him, below was darkness.

"Out of the nest, of course," Bruce said.

"Time to fly, little fledgling," Lawrence grabbed Tobias' shoulder as did Bruce and pushed him off.

He let out a gasp.

He tumbled down and down and down.

His vision getting darker with every second. The boys' laughter growing fainter the farther he fell.

The trees did not reach out to catch him.

He landed and the light of the afternoon was gone.



Tobias slowly opened his eyes. His head throbbed as he got up, rubbing the dirt out of his hair. He stumbled a bit, regaining his balance and with it his vision. In the murky depths of the forest he saw shadows moving through beams of light that broke through the canopies of the trees. Bonfires were lit here and there as Corvids dressed in rags huddled around them. All genders and ages, walking around as if dazed and confused. Some begged for change as he passed. A few were missing a wing. Some coughed and babbled on some sermon of the mad. The scent of burning wood, filth, and hopelessness

filled the air. He had indeed fallen out of his nest and landed in the darkest pit of despair.

He nearly broke down in tears from how lost he was, but he then saw something in the air. It was a bat, but something was off about it. There were no wings or hide to speak of, it was a creature made from dust and earth. He was spellbound by it, looking around to see if anyone saw it too but they paid it no mind. Too distracted by misery.

He followed the thing and it took him deeper into the forest, past the encampment, and to a glen. Standing there was a child wearing a hooded cloak and carrying a peculiar broom to one side. She giggled as the bat flew around her head until it disappeared. She turned, following it as it evaporated and Tobias saw that she was human.

They both gasped, staring at each other in shock. She was caught breathless by being discovered, he had no words to finding another like him.

"Who are you?" She finally asked, holding her broom like a weapon.

"My name- my name is Tobias," he replied, almost forgetting it. "What are you doing?"

"Magic. I'm a witch, of course," she beamed with pride.

"Really? I've never seen a witch before!" Tobias gazed at the broom with wonder.

"Training to be one, at least," the girl's mood dimmed a little. "Watch this," she knelt down and picked up a handful of dust from the ground. She took in a deep breath, closed her eyes, and blew the dust out of her hand. The stuff turned into the shape of two rabbits, Tobias dodged them as they hopped past him until they eventually vanished.

"What was that?" Tobias laughed.

"Dust bunnies!" The girl smiled. "Here, I can teach you."

"But I don't know magic."

"Yes you do!" The girl swatted him on the shoulder. "Mother Midnight, my teacher, says that everyone has magic in them. Just pick up some dirt. Go on."

Tobias picked up the smallest amount that he could muster. He never liked getting his hands dirty.

"Now, take a deep breath," she told him and he obeyed. "Hold it. Close your eyes and think of what you want it to be."

Tobias stiffened his back, holding the air in. He closed his eyes and imagined a snake slithering from side to side across the ground. He then blew and opened his eyes. The dust formed something ambiguous, a snake it certainly was not, skipping in the air like a pebble on a lake and then was gone.

"Well. . . it did take me a month to learn that one," the girl said with a frown. "Why aren't you a Corvid like them?" She gestured to the camp beyond.

"I was born this way," Tobias said, a routine of someone who had said it a thousand times.

"Okay," she smiled.

Tobias rubbed the back of his head to make sure he wasn't suffering from brain damage. Did he hear her correctly? *Okay?* As in it was *okay* that he looked that way? As in *okay I don't mind?* He felt a weight lift off his shoulders that he never realized was there before.

"How did you get down here, then?"

"I fell. I was walking home and these two boys-" he stopped. His mind sent him an image that left him unable to finish.

"What?" The girl asked, confused.

"You're the missing girl!" Tobias exclaimed. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the poster.

"Where did you get that?" She stared at it in horror.

"Above," he pointed to Corvid City. "Why don't you want to go back?"

"That place was *horrible*! Madame Toadstool, the headmistress made us do so many terrible things over and over again! So many rules for no reason at all!"

"Sounds like my father," Tobias said sheepishly. "He controls the Law of the city."

"What is *Law*?" She winced.

"It's a lot of rules that everyone has to follow or else you'll get punished. . . or worse," he added after a small pause of shame.

The girl made a face as if she just tasted something bitter. "I *hate* rules! At least with magic no one tells you what's good or bad. It's all about how you use it."

"The Law made the divide between the city and down here," Tobias walked with her. "He'd never say this, but sometimes I think my father believes I should be with the fledglings. Because of my deformity and all."

Lenore squinted her eyes, trying to decipher what he meant by his appearance, then shrugged after finding no evidence of any kind. "Well, maybe life would be easier for you if people weren't so stubborn about what being normal meant," she said casually.

Tobias stopped. He had never considered this before. He had always thought that the scornful looks and the bullying was just a bad side effect of his birth. But perhaps the truth was

that his so-called deformity was nothing to overcome. It was *them* who had to overcome their beliefs about *him*.

As he placed the poster back into his coat pocket, he noticed the daylight growing fainter through the trees. "It's getting late, my parents are going to be so worried about me! How am I ever going to get back up there," he grimaced as he looked at the city that seemed hundreds of miles above them.

"Get on," the girl gestured to the broom.

"What? I've never flown before! What if I fall again!" He backed away from her a couple of steps.

"You just have to hold on. I've gotten good at it. Promise," the girl smiled. She let the broom go and it hovered in the air. The handle extended to fit him.

Tobias stared at it for a moment. He moved his hand slowly towards the broom as if it was going to bite him. Once he realized that the wood had no teeth, he grabbed it, swinging his legs carefully over. He gingerly sat down. The next thing he knew, his feet were no longer touching the ground.

He did his best not to shout as they lifted higher into the air. They swerved through branches as he directed her to his house, making sure that they were not seen, since one of the Laws was that magic was forbidden. Tobias couldn't help but feel joy as they flew, thinking to himself that he finally felt how a Corvid does when they spread their wings and take flight. It was a sensation that he had only felt in his dreams.

They reached his bedroom window and he gently pushed it open. The room itself was small and modest like the boy who lived in it. There were barely any signs of an identity of its own, almost as if it were embarrassed to have a personality.

"That was *amazing*!" He said as he jumped over the threshold, hoping that he hadn't landed too loud to be heard.

"Would you like to do it again tomorrow?" The girl asked.

"Really? You mean it?" Tobias gawked at her.

"Of course! I will fly by tomorrow night so that you won't be suspected," the girl brightened up as she thought of something. "Maybe we can teach some of the Corvids down below some magic!"

"That might be a bad idea," Tobias cautioned. "If word gets out to my father that the fledglings are doing magic, all sorts of horrible things could happen. They're supposed to stay in their place, you know. And he gets furious when the Laws are broken."

"I won't tell if you won't," she gave him a naughty smile that he secretly wanted to make himself.

"Well. . . all right. Tomorrow night, then," he briefly looked behind his shoulder, it was done more as an impulse than a need. "What is your name, by the way?"

"Lenore," she said. "I'll see you tomorrow!" And with that, the extraordinary young witch flew away after entering his life and changing the course of it forever.



7. MAKING MISCHIEF

The unraveling of civilization began with laughter. Crowbar's day had progressed as it always had until he heard a strange sound. At first he thought it was the wind, but there was no breeze to be detected. Then it occurred to him that the supposed wind was in fact a high-pitched giggle, at which point he looked around and saw no children playing in his immediate vicinity. With a cold rush of horror, he looked down from the tree that he was in and heard the laughter coming from the fledglings below.

It was a sound that he had only heard in his nightmares and dared not to consider the fact that it could appear in his waking life. It was a sound that broke the silence of complacency. It was a sound that signaled hope and joy. To Crowbar, hope and joy from the fledglings were smoke signals of anarchy to come.

Of course, it had been the doing of our beloved friends Lenore and Tobias. She had arrived by his window the next night just as she said she would. Tobias hopped on to her broom with glee, no longer afraid of feeling unsafe, and they went straight below the trees. Once there, Lenore entertained children with the dust spell, helping each child form their own spiders, dragons, and serpents of earth. They would return

every night with a new wonder to cast for the downtrodden. Lenore would teach them to manifest colors in the air with their voices. She would rub sap on a tree mixed with moon dust so that the bark would come alive. It would shape a gnarled weathered face in the trunk and tell them stories of what it had witnessed since its planting hundreds of years ago. She once picked up a frog and licked its belly three times, giving it the ability to sing a full opera.

Once, she found a skull buried in the dirt. She carved a hole into the side of it and whispered *sweet bones, sweet bones, dried under dew, tell me something that is true.* She then placed her ear against the hole as you would a shell that you found on the beach. But instead of hearing the ocean, she heard its story of how it was once a young man who was betrayed by his best friend and murdered in the woods. She would pass it around the Corvids and they would all listen with wrapt attention at the skull's story.

Within weeks, they grew familiar with the fledglings. There were the Crage sisters, born conjoined, who loved dancing the Fear King Waltz. There was Little David, a boy with a broken beak, but the singing voice of an angel. Robert Kindred, an elderly Corvid, who told tales of his adventurous youth before a werewolf bit off both of his legs. The Willow family- who had a knack for performing comic plays- would make puppets out of wool and send the children into fits of laughter.

Tobias formed relationships with the younger children. The ones who were blind or disabled. They shared stories about their lives, not to compete in a competition of misery, but to be heard. To tell of their experiences of what it meant to live a life

that was different. If Lenore's magic was about casting enchantments, then Tobias' magic was in listening to those like himself. Perhaps, he thought, this was his calling. He would not grow up to inherit the Law, he would become a healer instead.



Mother Midnight was delighted. "What a wonderful way to practice!" She said hovering over a smoking cauldron. "Pass me the hemlock."

Lenore fetched a vial filled with flowers and roots from a cabinet. "I thought you would be pleased! Thank you for lending me your broom."

"Of course," her teacher said as she dumped the contents of the vial into the bubbling brew, making it glow green. "It will be yours one day, after all."

"Really?" Lenore gasped.

"It belonged to my teacher and her teacher before her and so on," Mother Midnight stirred the cauldron with a large wooden spoon. "And it will be yours. If you complete the Sabbath that is. Two cups of bat blood."

"What happens during the Witch's Sabbath?" She asked as she scooped up two glasses of bat blood from a jar. "Is it difficult?"

"Extremely. Some have never survived. But that's that Baba's work for you," she poured the glasses into the cauldron which emitted a high-pitched squeak and bats made of smoke flew out of it.

Lenore stopped. The hair stood still on the back of her neck. "The Baba. You mean *the* Baba Yaga?"

"Indeed," Mother Midnight spat into the liquid. "It's a title rather than a name. A Baba Yaga for every witch who was brave enough to take up the Art."

"How old do you have to be to take it?" Lenore shuddered with both dread and excitement.

"Sixteen." This gave Lenore pause. Sixteen felt so soon and yet so far away at the same time.

"Come here, child," The witch called her over. The mysterious liquid continued to bubble and boil as it glowed from green to purple.

"What is that stuff?" Lenore wrinkled her nose from the sharp smell.

"Resurrection potion," Mother Midnight said. "Remember when I told you about the responsibility involved with magic? Well, in order to know how to be responsible, you must learn what is *irr*esponsible," she gestured to the brew. "This potion allows one to resurrect a body after it is dead."

"Why is that irresponsible?" Lenore asked, attracted to the color. "Aren't you saving someone's life?"

"No," her teacher said coldly. "Once the soul has left the body it cannot be put back. This potion replaces the soul with something else. . . something terrible." She shuddered as she spoke.

Djali called from the cathedral to help him light the candles, Mother Midnight answered him and left the room. Lenore stared inside the cauldron. The purple liquid was so beautiful, so strange, so dangerous, that she could not look away from it.

She glanced at the doorway and acted quickly. She grabbed an empty vial from the cupboard and scooped up some of the potion. Placing a stopper on it, she shoved it in her pocket before the witch returned.

Lenore heeded her teacher's warning, but the part of her that didn't like rules thought otherwise. After all, if that same voice lead her to do so much good with the fledglings, how could it lead her astray?



Miles away, Tobias' father was not so fond of current events. The topic of conversation over a dinner of salted crickets revolved around the recent report given to him by Broadbeak earlier that day. He had been assigned to go down below and find out what had been the cause of all the laughter, joy, and singing that gave Crowbar such unease. After ruffing up a few fledglings, the confession was given: Two human children. A boy and a girl. And the girl was a witch.

"A *witch*!" Crowbar cried out as he slammed his fist on the table, making all of their plates tremble. "A witch in *my* city! Law 374 dictates that witches are never to set foot here!"

"Why?" Tobias asked quietly.

"It is the Law, son! And we must obey the Law! Always!" Crowbar stabbed a cricket with his fork.

"But *why*, father? Why does that Law exist? What is its purpose?" He felt something rising in him. A kind of swelling of emotions that he found to be both exciting and uncomfortable.

"We never question the Law. The Law was made to keep this city safe. That is why we follow it. Without it, the whole thing would crumble."

"But the rest of the Hallowland doesn't have any Laws," he ventured into deeper waters, thinking of how Lenore reacted when he first mentioned the Law to her.

"Darling, please," Mrs. Crowbar touched her son's hand. "Your dinner is getting cold." She had a speed to her voice that suggested a willingness to end a conflict before it began.

"Mother, I'm just asking questions," he patted the top of her hand with reassurance.

"Questions are dangerous," Crowbar continued to eat. "Leads to rebelliousness, anarchy, destruction."

"They aren't hurting anyone, are they?" Tobias was concerned that perhaps his actions might have lead to some real trouble.

"Not yet."

"Not *yet*?" His concern turned to annoyance. "Then what are you so nervous about? It's only magic."

"You are so naive, son," Crowbar shook his head and scoffed with indignation. "Magic is not carnival trickery. Magic is miracles. If the fledglings start believing that the impossible is possible what else are they capable of?"

"Freedom," Tobias' temper rose.

"You confuse disorder for freedom."

"They live in despair!" His voice rose for the first time that he could remember. "All they do is wallow in poverty while we up here have things that they could only dream of!"

"Oh, my, I don't like this one bit," Mrs. Crowbar muttered to herself.

"Hold your tongue, Tobias Crowbar," his father slowly got up from his seat, glaring at him.

"Maybe magic is what they *need*!" Tobias shouted at him with tears in his eyes.

"In your room. *Now!*" Crowbar screamed and pointed out of the kitchen.

"*She only wants a friend!*" Tears streamed down his face. His eyes grew huge for a moment, as if he spoke too much.

"*Go, I said!*" His father roared, blinded with rage.

Tobias' throat clenched as if his father's words were Law. He could only sob and run to his room. The door slammed shut.

Crowbar stood shaking with rage while his wife looked at her food. Several minutes of silence passed until he sat back down again. "What has gotten into that boy?" He sighed.

"You know children his age," Mrs. Crowbar continued to eat now that the storm had passed. "They get so emotional during this time of their lives. He probably heard a schoolmate squawking some nonsense and he's just repeating it," she felt a strange sense of regret saying this, but she quickly brushed it off as a flair of indigestion.



Later that night, Tobias and Lenore sat on the broom like a bench high above the city as it slept. The stars glistened all around them and the moon glowed her brightest just for them.

"I don't understand him," Tobias said, concluding the recount of the night's argument. "Why can't he see that what you're giving the fledglings is a good thing?"

"Mother Midnight says that some people forget that magic exists when they start seeing things as ordinary. When it comes back, they see it as something dangerous," Lenore said. "They've been caged up in other people's ideas about themselves that they believe it's the only reality."

Tobias considered this. Before he met Lenore, he was convinced that his life had been an accident. That his deformity was a freak occurrence of nature that could never be reversed. He would always be mocked and rejected for the way he was born. But since befriending her, he understood that the freakishness of his birth was not an accident, but a miracle. He was the first human ever to be born in Corvid City. That had to count for something.

"I just wish he was happy," he said. "I wish he had a Lenore."

"Do you mean that?" Lenore asked.

"Of course I do. You're the best friend I've ever had!" He paused. "You're the only friend that I've ever had."

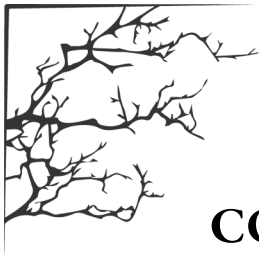
"I never had a friend before I met you," Lenore said, feeling a chill of vulnerability. "Before I met Mother Midnight, I thought my life would be horrible until I died. Now I feel hopeful with you and her in it."

"That makes two of us," Tobias chucked. "Maybe that's what you give all those lost people down there. Hope."

"You think hope and magic are the same thing?"

"Maybe," Tobias replied. They both looked at the moon in silence. Two friends under the spell of the magic that they casted together.

Years from now, Lenore would look back on this memory with grief. A grief for a time lost. A grief before everything came crashing down upon their heads.



8.
CONSPIRACY

It was an act of ignorance that sealed their doom. Mrs. Crowbar, of all people, was the one to do it. She had been doing laundry and while washing Tobias' coat, a piece of parchment had fallen out of its pocket. She unfolded it and found it was a poster for a missing girl, a missing *human* girl to be precise. Not only could it lead to one of the culprits that had been causing all that racket with the fledglings, but the reward money was rather high. She briefly wondered why her son would have such a thing then swatted the thought away as if it were an annoying fly buzzing around her head.

She had given the poster to her husband, a decision that she would regret for the rest of her life, and went back to washing.

Chief Inspector Crowbar examined it.

She only wants a friend, Tobias had told him.

Well, who else could be tricked more by the treacherous nature of a girl than the naive, sentimental, fool that he called a son?

His mind cracked like an egg.

So that was why Tobias had been so exasperatingly contrarian several nights before. He and the girl had been conspiring right under his beak! His one and only son had broken the Law. Generations of Crowbars had held the Law in the high-

est of care for the safety of Corvid City. Leave it to that deformed freak of a boy to soil the family name. He had not just broken Law 374 which dictated that no witchcraft should be used within the city limits. He had also broken Law 1: Any act against the Law is strictly forbidden. Law 239: Fledglings shall remain silent and unseen. And most damning Law 19: Any family member of the Law that acts against the Law shall be punished to the utmost severity. He assumed that the girl was an apprentice of the local witch that lived several miles away, but he could never conceive that his own flesh and blood would betray him and the foundation of the Law itself.

And now the ogre was late.

Here in this dimly lit Squalor tavern he waited for her to come. She was exactly five minutes late when the door finally opened. Madame Toadstool walked in, followed by a little cyclops girl carrying a bucket frothing with soapy water and a rag. The candles of the tavern were so low that he could barely make the woman out until she was at his table.

"Where's the girl, Crowbar?" Toadstool demanded, looking over his shoulder as if she was hiding in the dark.

"Chief Inspector Crowbar," he corrected her, standing up, never forgetting his manners. He lifted his hand to her.

"Yes, yes, yes," Toadstool waved a slimy hand at him. The cyclops girl washed the trail of it away on the floor. "You sent me a letter, I sent you one in return. The weather is fine. I despise small talk." She sat down opposite him.

"Very well," he said returning to his seat. Though he hated her for her rudeness, he was thankful his feathers remained unsullied by her excretion. "The girl is not here."

"Come again?" Toadstool simmered, puss burst from her nose and it went down her chin.

"I believe the agreement that we reached, Madame, was for the *payment* of the girl. Not for the girl herself," Crowbar sat back in his chair, hoping the candlelight disguised his disgust.

"Ah, yes," Toadstool grumbled and reached into her dress, pulling out a large leather sack. "Two hundred pentacles," she placed the sack on the table, it jingled with coins. He dared not touch the sticky thing just yet.

"Much appreciated. This shall go directly to enhancing our security," Crowbar said proudly, though he wasn't sure of the method yet. A fence, a net, cages, or perhaps a toxic gas in case they grew restless. Whatever it was, the goal was to keep the fledglings in their place.

"When will the girl be here?" Toadstool folded her arms.

"You shall have her by noon tomorrow," Crowbar answered. "Law 219 dictates that arrests cannot be made outside of city limits. However Law 764 dictates that bounties outside city limits are acceptable."

"Laws," she chuckled. "What a clever concept. Very much like the rules that my children at the orphanage adhere to. I think it's good for them. Rules build character. Isn't that right, Caroline?"

"Yes, Madame," the cyclops girl said as she quietly scrubbed the floorboards.

"You said she's learned witchcraft, yes?" Toadstool leaned forward.

"It appears so," Crowbar said. "She and my son have been causing a great deal of mischief in my city."

"Doesn't she just," Toadstool scoffed. "That girl has been nothing but trouble since the day she was dropped off to me in a basket. What shall become of your son?"

"He shall be arrested and receive the appropriate punishment."

"And what punishment would that be?"

"Execution," Crowbar said dryly.

Caroline stopped scrubbing. Silence hung in the air.

"DID I TELL YOU TO STOP, CHILD?" Toadstool roared at her. The few patrons that surrounded them briefly glanced their way and then returned to their spirits as if they only heard the wind.

"No, Madame," Caroline whispered in fear and began again.

"You would do that?" Toadstool tilted her head almost flirtatiously. "You would kill your own son?"

"Of course," Crowbar shrugged. "The Law demands it."

"Yes," Toadstool said slyly. "I like you, Chief Inspector. Lethal punishment is good for the young. It builds character."

In the dark glow of the candlelight, Crowbar silently agreed with her.



9.
BEHIND BARS

Lenore was at least given the courtesy of having breakfast before they started pounding on the door. "Who in the name of Hades could that be?" Mother Midnight grumbled as the thunder continued banging on. "I can't even remember the last time someone paid me a visit." She opened the door and was stunned to see Chief Inspector Crowbar along with two other Inspectors on her doorstep.

"Good morning," Crowbar said. "May we come in?"

"No," Mother Midnight replied. "Not until you tell me why."

"A witch's destain for authority," the Chief Inspector said. "How predictable," the two Inspectors laughed and pushed through the door.

"How dare you enter my home without permission!" Mother Midnight cried out as she was forced to back away. "This is a sacred place!" She grabbed her broom from the altar.

"Law 875 dictates. . . " Crowbar began, but he was at a loss for words upon seeing that he had stepped into a cathedral instead of a humdrum cottage. He gathered himself quickly, but the impression on him was not left unnoticed. "It dictates that whoever is hiding a fugitive shall be questioned regardless of their proximity to Corvid City's jurisdiction."

"What is going on?" Lenore stormed out of the kitchen along with Djali. She stood as still as a statue upon seeing the Inspectors. She felt deep down in her bones that this was Tobias' father and, whatever the reason that brought him here, it was not good.

"Ah," Crowbar turned to her, his monocle blazing with the light of the candles like a circle of flame. "Just the girl we are looking for."

"This girl is not a fugitive, but my apprentice," Mother Midnight said. "If you do not leave my home this instant, I shall be compelled to use excessive force." She brandished her broom and it turned into a sword.

"Your magic is no match for the Law, old woman," Crow snapped back. "Law 317 dictates that anyone who assaults an Inspector shall be executed on site."

"Any person, perhaps," Djali said, "but not any animal." He tilted his head down so that his mighty horns could be seen in all their dark glory. He bolted across the tiles and struck one of the Inspectors down. The other Inspector grabbed one of the horns and lifted Djali's head up.

"Say the word Chief Inspector," Broadbeak said, revealing a knife and holding it to Djali's throat. "And we'll have a nice goat stew for supper." Djali's rectangular eye widened with fear.

"No!" Lenore cried. "I'll go with you! Whatever you want, I'll do it! Just don't hurt him," tears welled in her eyes as she remembered the kindness and warmth the familiar gave to her on her first night there.

"You heard the girl. Let the beast go," Crowbar demanded.

Broadbeak let go of Djali with a frustrated sigh, the goat let out a bleat of disdain. The other Inspector slowly got up from

the floor, holding his midsection with a pain that would last several days.

Lenore walked over to Crowbar with her hands held out in front of her. Feeling the sinking feeling that comes with giving in to the cruelties of life.

"I'll come for you," Mother Midnight whispered in her ear. "Just as I did before. I'll come to the Tower and save you."

"No," the apprentice said quickly. "If you do that, they'll surely kill you and Djali." To Mother Midnight's surprise, she had said this with a severity that she was not expecting. In that moment, the girl had become the wise adult and the old woman had become the rebellious youth.

"Well done, child," Crowbar said as she placed manacles on her wrists. "It appears you know the limitations of witchcraft, after all."

"Better to be a witch that knows her limitations than a coward who inflicts his own on others," she stared back at him. With tears streaming down her face, she looked back at Mother Midnight and Djali. "Good-bye, my loves," she whispered.

The two other Inspectors grabbed her by the shoulders and led her outside. They flew up and into the morning sky. Lenore turned her head and watched the cottage grow smaller and smaller. A part of her was satisfied to see Chief Inspector Crowbar reduced to the size of an ant.



Tobias sat in the dungeon of the courthouse. He thought this day would go as it usually did, but instead of walking

to school alone, he was escorted by a group of Inspectors. He called to his mother, not understanding what was going on, but she only replied with sobbing. It was only until he was shoved into a cell and the bars were slammed shut that he understood why he was there.

As he sat on the bench and gazed at the cobblestone walls that surrounded him with only a single torch mounted on the wall for light, he wondered how his father discovered his adventures with Lenore. Could it have been that he had given too much away at the dinner table? Could it be that in his fury he had drawn back the curtain and revealed his secret life? Whatever it was, he felt closer to the fledglings than ever before.

He waited in the chilly cell, listening to rats scurry across the floor and bats squeaking from the rafters above. The drip, drip, drip of water somewhere in the dark. It was hours until he heard the metallic door of the dungeon open again.

His father silently walked down the corridor, the rusty ring of keys jangled like teeth in his hand. He unlocked the bars and opened them. He quietly sat down next to his son. They both looked at each other in silence.

"You're probably wondering why you are here," Crowbar finally said, his voice echoing off the walls as if he was at the bottom of a well.

"I know why," Tobias said without anger. To be angry was useless now.

"I will not ask why you did what you did," his father said. "The girl that you were with charmed you. Women have their ways. Especially witches."

"That witch is my friend," Tobias' mouth twitched, the remark stinging him.

"Someone who tempts you to do bad things is no friend at all," Crowbar shook his head. "It doesn't matter. The reality is that you are here."

"Why do you do this, father?" Tobias whispered. "Why do you follow the Law so blindly?"

His father stared at the wall for what felt like an eternity. Tobias watched his black eyes move back and forth, trying to find words to something that was indescribable. "Because it is my responsibility," he said. "The Law was created by my family to protect the order of our city. The rest of the Hallowland lives in ignorance. They live as if swimming in an endless ocean, not knowing that they can drown or get caught by the tide in any direction. The world needs rules. It needs walls to keep things from spilling out. Otherwise nothing means anything. The Law is a sacred thing. It was passed on from generation to generation until it was placed in my hands." He briefly looked up. "The great eye of History is always watching me. I feel it guiding me every day. It helps me hold the tools that it made to keep you, your mother, and everyone else safe. I was born to protect this city. It is in my blood to be its hero."

Tobias sat for a moment, taking it in. "But. . . don't these-these *tools*, as you call them, don't these tools feel like chains?"

"No," Crowbar looked at him with tears in his eyes. "They feel like gifts," he placed his hand on his shoulder. This was the first time Tobias had ever seen his father cry.

"Your appointment with the gallows is at midnight," Crowbar stood up and adjusted his coat. "We shall fix you a last meal. I suggest you get some rest beforehand."

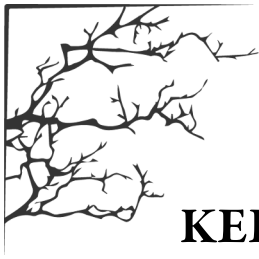
"*What?*" Tobias cried out. "How can you be so cruel? I'm your only son!"

"You lost the privilege of being my son once you decided to break the Law," Crowbar closed the bars and locked them.

"And you stopped being my father when you decided to be controlled by it!" Tobias screamed, shaking the bars of his cell with tears of rage.

Crowbar did not respond. He looked down the corridor as if thinking it over. There was a small twitch in his feathers and then he walked away as if he never heard what was said.

As the door of the dungeon slammed shut, Tobias laid down on the bench holding his knees together as he sobbed in terror. He hoped whatever happened next, that Lenore was safe.



10.
KEEPER OF THE FLAME

Lenore's return to the orphanage was not a welcome one. Upon being released from her bonds and dragged into the horrible fortress by Madame Toadstool's slimy hands, the orphans jeered and hissed at her. Mocking her for thinking that she was so special for escaping. That she was a fool for even considering the idea that freedom was an option. Many orphans had attempted to flee and had failed. Only Caroline looked at her with pity.

"You stupid, stupid child!" Madame Toadstool cried as she lead her up the Tower. "You thought witchcraft could save you? That a glorified fireworks show could keep you from me? PHAH!" She laughed. "No, no, no, my pet. Every orphan knows that no matter how far they go, they always return to the arms of Madame Toadstool!" She flung the door open at the top of the Tower and threw Lenore inside. "It builds character," the ogre smirked and slammed the door shut. Locking it.

Lenore raged. She screamed, she kicked, she pounded on the door knowing that it would do her no good. But the anger was bubbling so hot inside of her, the only way to release it was to wage war on the stone and wood of her prison.

Once she calmed down, she looked around. Madame Toadstool, or the orphans under her instruction to be more precise, had improved the security of the small room since she had left. They had installed iron spikes on the walls, barbed wire twisting the perimeter like ivy. Iron locks galore were shackled to the door. It was almost cozy in how intimate the danger was.

"You've escaped before," she said to herself. "You can escape again." She went up to the door and snapped her fingers. It did not budge. She snapped again and again and again with the same results. She shook her fist. She was trained in witchcraft, blast it! She had done things she could never dream of doing and yet she couldn't open a bloody door?

She sat in the middle of the room and wept. She wept for the oppressing darkness of the orphanage. She wept for her lost magic. She wept that she would never see Mother Midnight or Djali again. She wept in anger at the Law.

She soon fell asleep and hoped that whatever came next, Tobias was safe.



There was a glow in the darkness. A flickering red-orange that had no flame. It casted shadows on walls that did not exist. Lenore looked deeper, but there were no signs of where she was. Only the phantom fire that signaled she was in a space at all.

A figure walked towards her. She felt it before she saw it. The shadow grew shape, but not form. It was a woman, her fea-

tures invisible. The figure drew nearer and nearer, the fire glowing brighter shaping a room that she had never seen before. The light revealed the woman, she was in a black Victorian dress and a hat with a raven feather sticking out of it. A small veil came down from the hat, shrouding her beautiful face with a spider web pattern.

"Hello, Lenore," the woman said, her black lipsticked mouth smiling. "I've been waiting for you."

"Yes," she responded, confused by the sense of nostalgia stirring within her. "I've. . . I've been waiting for you too. Who are you?"

"I am the Keeper Of The Flame," the woman said, raising her arms. As she did so the light grew brighter and Lenore saw that she was in a vast temple. Stone columns went on for miles upon miles. Each one carved with sigils that reminded her of Mother Midnight's broom.

"What is this place?" Lenore gazed around her, the question repeating in echos that faded each time it was asked. "And why do I feel like I know you?"

"The answer to the first: This is the Temple Of The Sacred Flame," said the Keeper. "It exists not in your mind, but all minds. Beyond Time and Space, beyond Dreaming and Waking. It is the sanctuary of Creation. To answer the second: You know me because I am you."

"You are?" Lenore asked stunned. "How?'

"I am not the you that you are now. But the you that you will become," the Keeper placed one of her black nails to her chin in thought. "Or, at least, I am the you that you hope to be one day," she concluded.

"Why am I here?"

The Keeper Of The Flame held out her hand. "Come, young one, and meet our mother."

Lenore took her hand and was pleased to feel that her palm was as warm as her smile. She felt a strange tethering in her fingers, as if she wasn't just holding hands with the woman, but that they shared hands.

The Keeper lead her to an enormous statue that was of three women but was also a single woman. The left side of the statue was of a young beautiful teenager, her face filled with joy, in her hands she held up a silver crescent moon. The middle side of the statue was of the same woman, but older, her belly swollen with pregnancy. Her face was calm and nurturing, in her hands she held up a silver full moon. The right side of the statue was the elderly version of the woman, her eyes stared with confidence and her expression was still with reserve. It reminded Lenore of her teacher. In the elder's arms, she held up another silver crescent moon. Out of their mouths flowed the clearest sparkling water that Lenore had ever seen, falling down a well at the statue's feet like a flood of diamonds.

"Beautiful, is she not?" The Keeper asked.

"She's the most beautiful lady I've ever seen," Lenore looked up with tears in her eyes, feeling so overwhelmed with emotion that she couldn't explain why. It was both terror and beauty all wrapped up together. "Who is she?"

"She is the three-faced goddess of witches, Hecate," the Keeper said with resonance. "She is the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone- Past, Present, and Future. From her mouth springs the Waters Of Life which then gives birth to the Sacred Flame," she closed her eyes in meditation, then she opened them, looking at Lenore. "Would you like to taste it?"

"Oh yes!" Lenore cried out. "Yes, I would! More than anything!" Her mouth felt dry as if she had been walking in a desert.

The Keeper smiled again and let go of her hand, severing the tie and making Lenore feel like herself again. She went to the well and bent down, reaching both of her arms into it. Turning around, she did not hold water in her hands, but fire.

"Every witch must come to this place and behold the Sacred Flame," the Keeper said, returning to Lenore. "The question is, will you accept it?" She held out her hands to the child.

Lenore looked at the flame and noted that it wasn't like any other fire she had seen before. It glowed with a luminescence that frightened her. Orange, red, and blue, each color blazed and sparked at her as if to ask: *Do you dare take me?*

She took the challenge and cupped her hands and the Keeper gave the flame to her. She nearly jumped with surprise when she realized that it wasn't hot. It didn't have any temperature at all, in fact. It only had weight, feeling both soft and heavy at the same time like she was holding a baby bird of flame.

"Eat it," the Keeper instructed.

"What?" Lenore asked, her wonder breaking for a moment.

"You must consume the Flame," the Keeper said softly. "That is what it is for. To be consumed. To become a part of you," the Keeper nodded with encouragement. "It's all right. Nothing that is welcomed within you can harm you."

Lenore looked at it, skeptical of how the task was to be done. But she took in a deep breath, let it out, and opened her mouth, Slowly, she placed the fire inside and shut her lips

closed, swallowing it. The fire didn't taste like anything, indeed, it felt like drinking water. Her gaze was sent looking up and her eyes rolled back into her head.

A seed sprouted inside of her. Roots grew out of it, twisting and taking hold of her soul. The roots grew and grew until they became branches. The branches birthed leaves and flowers of every kind. Fruit grew from the branches. Fruit filled with the most glorious, crimson, hot and steaming blood, each of them beating like a heart. She felt her arms change. Skin turned to feathers like she was draped in a luscious velvet coat. Her feet curled and turned into talons with the ecstasy of her toes slipping into a warm bath. Her mouth elongated and solidified into a beak with the snugness of a mask. She opened her eyes.

She was a raven.

"Very good, young one," the Keeper smiled above her. She knelt down and cupped her hands once again, offering them as a nest.

"Thank you," Lenore said, hopping into her hands with ease.

"You are most welcome," The Keeper kissed her on the head and warmth fluttered through her. "Now, fly my pretty! Fly!" She threw her hands up and Lenore was sent hurtling through the air.

Flapping her wings, she rose higher into the dark. A pinprick of light was up above. Higher and higher she climbed, the wind flowing through her feathers. With every wingbeat the light grew brighter and brighter.

She awoke with a spark in her that she had never felt before. Bolting upright off of the floor she raced to the door. She lifted up her hand and noticed that she was no longer in her

raven form, but she still felt it. She felt the raven inside her beating its wings with the pulse of the fruit that the Waters Of Life had given her. She snapped her fingers and bright sparks erupted from the locks on the door. Smoke streamed out of them like incense and she waited.

The door opened on its own accord.



11.
THE RAVEN

Caroline's hands were not the hands of a young girl, but of a much older woman. They were calloused and cracked from the years of scrubbing away at Madame Toadstool's slime. All of the orphans shared similar attributes, the scars of longing that came from being imprisoned in the orphanage, the cuts and scrapes of anger and grief of a wasted childhood, the bruises left by fear pounding away at their souls, wanting to escape.

Jealousy had seeped through the cracks of the walls when word got out that Lenore had fled several months ago. How was it done? There was no sign of her plan in the Tower. No hole that she had carved into its stones, no rope to lead her safely down, no map or outline of a scheme anywhere. The simplicity and impossible nature of her disappearance had increased the envy of the children as time went on.

But Caroline saw things in a different light. The miracle of Lenore's flight filled her with hope. The knowledge that she had picked up while eavesdropping on Toadstool and Crowbar's conversation had even strengthened her belief. If the impossible could happen to Lenore, then why couldn't it happen to her or the other orphans? Perhaps escaping from a life of despair was not achieved by intellect and action alone, but faith. A faith that it was not a question of *if* things would get better,

but *when* things would get better. That shift in perspective was both simple and yet difficult. Or was difficulty found in allowing herself to feel hope for once in her life?

She contemplated this as she sat with the rest of the children for dinner, eating their horrid meals as their mistress gobbled her own feast with delight and greed.

"So what do you think about Lenore being back?" A goblin named Jacob asked in a whisper next to her.

"I feel terrible," Caroline said. "She was nice to me."

"Nice doesn't get you far here," Jacob said dryly. "Poor girl should have kept her mouth shut in the first place. If I was her, I'd wait till the opportune moment while Toadstool is asleep, grab a knife from the kitchen and. . . "

But before he could reveal his master plan, all of the candles went out in the hall. There was no sign of any wind or breeze, they were merely snuffed out by phantom hands. The children gasped and some laughed. Commotion and the rattling of chairs and plates could be heard in the dark.

"QUIET, ALL! QUIET!" Madame Toadstool's voice rang out in the void. "I have a lantern here, somewhere." Feet shuffled and the ogre let out a few curses as she wandered in the dark. She opened a cabinet and found a match. She struck it and an amber glow shone through a rusty lantern that she held in one hand.

"Now which one of you urchins is responsible for this?" She lifted her arm up and searched the hall. "SPEAK UP! Or you'll be joining the girl in The Tower!" The light of her lantern fell on the faces of the orphans, each one looking more afraid than the last. "SPEAK UP I SAID!"

"Good evening, Madame Toadstool," a voice said from behind her.

She swung the lantern around and let out a scream as she saw a raven perched on the top of her chair.

"I have waited for this moment for a long time," said the raven.

"Who-who are you?" Madame Toadstool choked and trembled at the sight of the bird.

"I am your worst nightmare come true," the raven said in a cold voice. "I am all of your sins made real. And I have come to collect what has been owed to me."

"Sweet spirit, I do not know what you mean," her mouth quivered. "What sins have I committed? I have dedicated my life only to the protection of children without a home," she looked around at the orphans to see if anyone would speak for her, but none of them did.

"Protection? You have only imprisoned," the raven glared at her with its obsidian eyes. "You have dedicated your life to the suffering of others. You force those that are smaller than you to do your bidding while you yourself never raise a finger. You starve others while you devour. You disguise your work as charity yet you keep a defenseless child locked in a tower without food or light. Your sins are endless, Madame Toadstool. And for that you must pay with your soul."

The ogre sat down the lantern and fell to her knees, clasping her hands in front of her. "No, spirit, please! I beg of you! I-I am a good person! I provide shelter and clothing! I provide food and housing! Have mercy on me spirit!" She sobbed. Madame Toadstool was no longer the terrifying, brutal menace that she had been for all of the orphans' lives. She was now a

sad, pitiful creature pleading for her life. Her slime mixed together with her tears.

"Groveling will not save you," the raven ignored her cries. "It is now apparent that your fear of death has made you weak. You raise yourself high above those less fortunate, yet here you are, terrified in my presence. You pathetic thing."

"I BEG YOU SPIRIT!" Madame Toadstool howled as she clutched the velvet of the chair. "I BEG YOU TO SPARE ME!"

"Beg? Yes, beg. Beg for your life," the raven hopped down from its perch and landed on the seat. It transformed into Lenore, making the ogre release her grip from the velvet. Lenore leaned forward almost nose to slimy nose with her. "It builds character," she said.

Madame Toadstool's eyes grew so large they might as well have been balloons. Her mouth opened wide, but no words came from it. Only a shuddered gasp omitted from her throat as if she was choking. She clutched her chest, falling backwards, until collapsing onto the floor.

She was dead.

Silence hung in the air.

"You. . . you *killed* her," a faun named Rebecca said.

"I only meant to scare her," Lenore tried to make sense of what had just transpired. She briefly thought about using the resurrection potion in her pocket but then decided that this was not the body to use it on."She had a bad heart, you know. It finally just gave out on her, I guess."

"What do we do now?" Jacob asked. "What with her dead and all, how are we going to survive?"

"Well, you have for so long," Lenore said. "You know how to cook and clean, surely you could live without someone telling you what to do all the time."

The children pondered their fate. They had never considered what it would be like to live without some looming threat hovering over them. At first it felt uncomfortable, like putting on clothes that you've never worn before. But as each moment past, the sense of freedom made them feel lighter than air. They slowly began to clap and yelp with delight. Then they cheered:

"*No more Toad!*"

"No more Toad!"

"No more Toad!"

They hoisted Lenore up on their shoulders, parading her around as they danced on the tables and celebrated. A smile beamed on her face, the first time joy had ever been felt within the walls of the orphanage. At last, these children with no homes and no family and something to finally call their own: A future.

"Lenore! Lenore, come here!" Caroline called to her through the noise.

"What is it?" Lenore asked, still smiling as they placed her down.

"I was there when Toadstool and Crowbar met," urgency filled Caroline's voice. "They were talking about how to capture you. But Crowbar said something about his son!"

"What about him?" Lenore's smile quickly faded.

"He's going to kill him!" Caroline's eye grew wide. "He's going to arrest and kill him for what he was doing with you!"

"When?" Lenore grabbed the cyclopes girl's shoulders.

"I don't know! But you must hurry!"

"Thank you, Caroline," Lenore said and embraced the cyclops. "I hope you live the life you have always wanted." She turned back into a raven. Caroline rushed over to open the window with a tear in her eye.

Lenore flew out of it and the other children crowded around to wave goodbye to her. They clapped and whistled, she wished she could have returned the gesture, but time blew against her as hard as the wind in the night sky. She never looked back and never saw that place again.



12.
GALLOWS

The flight to Corvid City felt like hours. Compared to her first venture to Mother Midnight's cottage, it was so long she had thought she had lost her way. But as the clouds parted, she saw the shimmering lights of the city glowing amongst the trees.

She dived towards the courthouse and swooped around it, finding the courtyard behind, nestled in enormous branches. She could just barely make out the figures of Chief Inspector Crowbar and some of his minions surrounding the gallows. She flew down and as she turned into her human form.

She was too late.

Tobias' body swayed slowly in the breeze, the rope creaking as it went. His neck was broken and his head hung to the side, eyes closed. His heels knocked together in time with the swaying. The boy she befriended and cared for. The boy that witnessed her perform magic with joy and wonder, was no more.

"Impressive trick," Crowbar said from behind her. "I should have known you would have escaped. The ogre will be looking for you again."

"She's dead," Lenore said flatly, staring at the body in front of her with tears falling down her face.

"Pity," Crowbar mirrored her flatness. "If it gives you any comfort, his final words were *thank you, Lenore*."

The young witch turned around with cold hate in her eyes. "How can you behave so carelessly? You were his father."

"I could have refused to watch," he said, not changing his tone. "But I chose to witness it myself. As a reminder that the Law must be upheld. No matter the cost."

The other Inspectors cut Tobias down from the gallows and laid him on a stretcher. As they moved down the steps, Lenore remembered the resurrection potion in her pocket. "Wait!" She called to them as they reached the ground. One of them looked at Crowbar for orders, but the Chief Inspector merely shrugged. What good was it to stop her when the boy was dead?

Lenore pulled out the vial and uncorked it. She poured the purple liquid down his mouth, some of it spilling onto the ground with a hiss. "Please work, please work, please work," she whispered as she placed the vial back in her pocket. She closed her eyes and repeated it. Whether it was a spell or a prayer, it didn't matter. They were words of hope and they were better than the silence of a hopeless world.

The body twitched. It twitched again as if an electric pulse ran through it. The limbs flailed and danced like a marionette. Twitching turned into shuddering, shuddering turned into convulsing.

Its eyes opened and they were no longer the hazel eyes of Tobias. They were glowing with purple light.

"Stand back!" Crowbar called to the Inspectors, which they needed no order to do so. Even Lenore shuffled a few steps away in fear.

The body arched its back, planting its feet firmly on the ground. Its arms twisted and began to walk like a spider.

"Friend!" The corpse cried out to her in a voice that was not Tobias'. *"Friend!"*

"Get away from me!" Lenore screamed at the horrid thing, continuing to move backwards. Terror, sadness, and confusion filled her heart.

"*Friend!"* The body said again with its upside down mouth. No expression held its face, the thing that controlled it was using it as a ventriloquist dummy.

"Son?" Crowbar asked in a weak, trembling voice.

The thing turned its broken neck towards him.

"What-what *are* you?" Crowbar asked in a pleading tone, tears filling his eyes.

"*Father!"* The thing said to him. *"Father!"* It began to crawl his way, scurrying towards him. Crowbar ran away and shrieked in a voice no one in the courtyard had ever heard him make. It was the shriek of a frightened chicken.

"Do something!" Crowbar yelped at Lenore. "Magic it away!"

"I don't know how!" Lenore sobbed, partially in anger at herself and partially because this abomination would never have happened if it wasn't for him.

An owl came screaming down from the sky. They all looked and saw the owl turn into Mother Midnight, broom in one hand, pinning the body to the ground with her boot. The corpse scratched and clawed at her ankle like a wild cat, but Mother Midnight firmly placed a hand to its mouth and closed her eyes. She whispered in a language that had not been spoken since the birth of fire and when the night sky was new. They

were words that could not be understood but held deep mystery and power to them. The head began to tremble and its eye lids closed. It grew limp and Mother Midnight let go of her grip as she finished her spell. Hundreds of purple embers came flying out of the open mouth, into the air until each one of them dissolved into nothing.

The terror was gone. The only sound was Mother Midnight's labored breathing.

"Thank you," Crowbar said, adjusting his coat and regaining his composure. "You have saved the life of a high ranking member of the Law. Because of this, you shall be awarded the honorable Medal of-"

"*Silence*," Mother Midnight hissed at him. "I would have let the creature ruin you if not by restraint. You are only alive by my will alone." She glared at him with her piercing silver eyes. "Come, my apprentice," she said to Lenore, turning back into her owl form.

"Mother Midnight. . ." Lenore whispered, not knowing what to say.

"Now," the owl commanded her. Obeying her teacher, Lenore solemnly turned into a raven, and the two witches flew away.

Either by Mother Midnight's doing or his own, Chief Inspector Crowbar stood in silence for a full hour. For the rest of his life, he would be haunted by the sight that he had just witnessed. Even after they removed the body and cremated it, even after his wife left him in grief and anger, even in his old age, he would wake up in the middle of the night with his feathers damp in a cold sweat and gasping for air. It was only until his final hour, when he was cooped up in a room at Corvid

City General Hospital, alone, that he asked himself the question. The question that had been tucked away since that horrible night and finally broke through when his brain had slowly dried up like an old prune and was released with his final breath: *Am I wrong?*

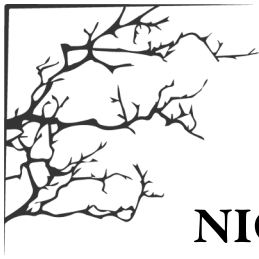
The stars mourned for Tobias. They watched the execution, crying and holding one another. They mourned for the man he would never grow into. They mourned the wishes he would never ask them to grant. They mourned the laughs, the joys, the pain, the family, the friends, all of the things that come with living a long life that he would never have.

A boy who was fourteen when this story began and fourteen when it ended.

A boy with no real family.

A boy with no real home.

Just a boy with a yearning for a friend.



13.
NIGHT VISION

When they returned to the cottage, the cathedral inside felt like a tomb. The candles gave no warmth, the vaulted ceiling only reminded Lenore of the cold limitlessness of oblivion, even the figures in the stain-glass windows seemed to judge her. All around her she felt the guilt and horror at what had transpired echoing from the outside world and into her heart.

"Mother Midnight," she said quietly. "Are you going to punish me for what I have done?" She braced herself for a scolding or a temporary transformation into a worm.

"The consequences of your actions are self-evident," her teacher replied, placing the broom on the altar. "To punish you would be cruel. You are already punishing yourself."

"Yes," Lenore wanted to cry, but the tears would not come. There was only a bitter frost behind her eyes that froze the grief.

"Come," Mother Midnight held out her hand. "Let us have some tea."

"Tea?" Lenore asked, taking her hand, feeling the soft wrinkles of her skin.

"I find that tea is the only proper way to respond to nights like this one," her teacher said gently. "Especially after someone has died."

They walked into the kitchen and Mother Midnight asked Djali to brew up some bog water tea. The goat obliged and though he did not know the details of what had happened, he knew that whatever had, it was disastrous enough to be followed by solemn silence and tea. He had known the witch long before she was old enough to understand the reverence of such a request and made the tea without a single word.

The teacher and the apprentice sat in the very same nook that Lenore had learned how to make a cup fly with her mind. What was once the spot of revelation and creation was now a chamber for reflection and stillness. Djali brought the two cups of tea on a tray and they both sat quietly, nursing and sipping without even looking at each other.

"What ails you, my child?" Mother Midnight broke the silence, her voice sounding as soothing as wind blowing through a set of chimes.

"Everything," Lenore said after a few moments. "Why did this happen? How could I have prevented it? What is the purpose of it all?"

"That is your mind talking," the witch said. "What does your heart tell you?"

"My heart?" Lenore was frustrated by her question. "Surely tonight we can skip the riddles."

"The mind asks questions," Mother Midnight pressed on with patience and grace. "The heart speaks truth. *Your* truth. What is your truth telling you?"

Lenore thought for a moment. Her brows furrowed, trying to find her truth. The image of consuming the fire from Hecate's well entered her mind and she used the light of the fire to explore the darkness. "I feel hopeless. I feel betrayed. I feel

ashamed. I feel scared. I feel anger. I feel doubt. I feel lost," she did not realize that the frost had melted as tears were slowly making their way out of her eyes.

"I see," Mother Midnight nodded. Her eyes went back and forth as if she was reading Lenore's words in the air. "Why do you feel ashamed?"

"Because I was able to save the orphans, but not Tobias," Lenore's voice trembled. "Because I used the resurrection potion even though you told be not to. Because I was stupid enough to think the potion would bring him back as he was. Because the fledglings will never see me again and they will despair even more than they already are."

"That is a lot of responsibility to place on your shoulders," Mother Midnight's eyes were full of compassion and pity. "Especially for someone so young."

"If it is not my responsibility, then who is it?" Lenore sniffed.

Mother Midnight took a deep sigh and reached over the table to hold Lenore's hand. "There are other worlds than this one. Hundreds, thousands. There are gates and doorways to them if you know where to look. I have not been to all of them, but I have been to many. Each one was unique, but they had this in common: life and death. There is no such thing as a perfect world. Joy and despair, life and death, no world is exempt from the cycle of the universe, my dear."

"Then what is the point of witchcraft if we cannot change the world?" Lenore shuddered. "What is the point of learning all these things if they don't make the world a better place?"

"Because witchcraft is not about changing *the* world," Mother Midnight said. "It is about changing *your* world. And in so doing, you change the world around you."

Lenore was confused by all of this, then she remembered her dream about the Keeper Of The Flame. "What did that all mean?" She asked after describing it to her.

"We witches must all meet the Keeper in our youth," Mother Midnight smiled with recognition. "I remember when I was your age I had the same dream that you had, the Keeper looked very much like I do now. I consumed the fire from the Goddesses' well and became an owl. It is the animal that represents the spirit. Yours is a raven."

"But *why*?" Lenore pleaded through gritted teeth.

Mother Midnight held her hands around Lenore's face. "Because you have night vision, my apprentice. The ability to see what others cannot. You hold a lantern out to the misunderstood and forgotten and say *I am here with you. You do not need to be afraid. Your strangeness is your magic*. That is what you gave to the orphans, to the fledglings, to that poor boy. You gave all of them hope, joy, and the belief that what makes them different is what makes them special. For the first time in their lives, they were seen All because you see yourself."

"I failed, though," Lenore choked. "The Law is still there. Tobias is dead. None of that matters now."

"My miracle child," her teacher smiled. "To consume the Sacred Flame in yourself and encourage others to do so is *the only thing that matters*. If we are not alive to do so, even if it is only for a brief moment, then what is the point of anything?"

Lenore sobbed. Words were of no use to her anymore. The floodgates of her heart had opened and all that filled her spilled

out in tears. Mother Midnight nestled her in her arms while Djali placed his head on her lap, letting her stroke his fur gently with her hands. She was uncertain of many things, but for the first time in her life, she was certain that this was what it felt like to have a family.



EPILOGUE: FAMILIAR

Days turned to weeks.

Weeks turned to months.

Lenore continued her training, learning how to cast spells, mix potions, and read Tarot. Her grief for what had happened to Tobias slowly healed. It was still there, it always would be, but the wound was treated and the skin grew over it. The scar that she would always carry in her heart, reminding her just how important his brief life meant to her. Grief transformed into gratitude. A magic of its own kind.

Corvid City was still ruled by Law and would be for generations. No longer in the Crowbar family, it would weaken with every new Chief Inspector that came until its inevitable collapse when the branches of the forest destroyed the city with their python grip.

None of the people in this story would be alive to see it, but they would be spoken of. Even now, Corvids gather around campfires, hearing the cries from their children to tell them the story of The Fledgling Boy And The Witch Girl. The elders recite the tale in dramatic fashion, gazing in wonder and awe as the fire blazes before them, sending out embers of hope into the air like little wishes.

It was a dark and stormy night when an unexpected visitor came to the cottage door. Lenore had been helping Djali extinguish the candles of the cathedral as rain deluged outside and lightning flashed the colors of the stain-glass windows on the walls. At first she thought it was hail beating against the door, for it sounded too sharp to be rain. As it continued, she heard a scratching sound on the wood of the door. Could it have been a mouse or a bird looking for shelter? She went over to investigate.

As she opened the door, drops of rain splashed on her face. It came down in curtains, only visible by the lamp that hung on the awning above. She was about to close the door, thinking it was just her imagination when she looked down.

A clump of soaked black hair was sitting on the doorstep. Tiny emerald eyes stared back at her and she realized that it was a kitten.

"Help," it said in a voice that was barely a whisper. Its eyes were filled with fear from the storm, weary of the hours, perhaps days, of wandering away from home. Lenore quickly scooped it up and brought it inside.

"It is quite adorable," Mother Midnight said as she dried it off with a towel. She set it down on a table in the kitchen. "It looks like a ball of soot."

The kitten hissed at her and shook its fur, sending flecks of water everywhere. "Though prone to sass," Mother Midnight wiped off her robes with a frown.

Djali came over with a saucer of milk and set it down in front of the kitten. "You said that she talked?" The goat asked.

"I don't believe she can form sentences," Lenore replied, watching the little thing with great attention. She couldn't de-

scribe it, but something about the kitten transfixed her beyond her adorable nature. "I feel like I know her somehow."

Djali and Mother Midnight exchanged glances. "Intuition between a witch and an animal is a strong sign of familiarity."

"Are you saying that *this* is my familiar?" Lenore asked. "But how? How did she know that a witch lived here?"

"Do not ask how the universe gives you a gift, my dear," her teacher smiled. "Accept the gift with gratitude."

The kitten finished lapping up the milk and stared at Lenore. Both of their heads cocked to the side, mirroring each other, not knowing who started the game first. The kitten's eyes glowed green for a moment and then she ran across the table on to her lap.

"What are you going to name her?" Djali asked.

"I think I will let her decide," Lenore scatched the kitten behind one ear. "When she is ready of course," the kitten purred with affirmation.

The storm died down. The curtains of rain slowly dripped, dripped, dripped off the ceiling of the cottage in wet drumming. The dark clouds parted to give the moon and the stars view to look inside the cottage window. They whispered to one another that a story was being written in that small bed room.

Her story.

As the two orphans slept, the kitten cradled in Lenore's arms, they both dreamt of old memories and new beginnings.

The Mrs. Macabre Chronicles will continue.

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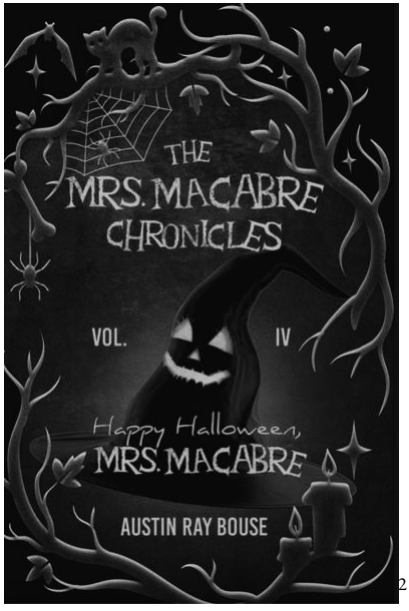
Did you love *Lenore*? Then you should read *Happy Halloween, Mrs. Macabre*[1] by Austin Ray Bouse!



[2]

TRICK OR TREAT?In the adventures of the witch Mrs. Macabre and the Gracey twins, Bram Vasquez has always felt like a supporting character in their story. But when he meets the Hallowbreed, the first trick-or-treaters, he may have found a new set of friends. Especially in their charismatic leader. But the Hallowbreed have something dark in store for Bram. One that will depend on Mrs. Macabre to save him. . . or this Halloween may turn deadly.

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1. https://books2read.com/u/3nP8M6

2. https://books2read.com/u/3nP8M6

This is the fourth book in **The Mrs. Macabre Chronicles** and can be read in order or as an individual volume.

Read more at https://www.austiniswriting.com/.



About the Author

Austin(They/Them) is the author of The Mrs. Macabre Chronicles and a practicing witch living in central Texas. They are non-binary and have a form of cerebral palsy. They plan on keeping it that way.

Instagram: @austinisspookyWebsite: austinraybouse.com
Read more at https://austinraybouse.com/.