

"Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again."

~Rebecca

When the first tree was planted, the ancients gathered—
some from the sand, some from the mist.
They carved names into its bark, each in their own tongue, and said:
"Here truth shall be weighed."

The hound lay at its roots.
The raven kept to its branches.
And the fire slept in its hollow heart,
waiting to burn away the lies.

Fire tests us.
Truth transforms us.
The shadows never die. They only change their name.

~From *Origin of Legend*, "The Tree"



ONE

April 6, 1965
Leelanau Peninsula, Michigan

There are good reasons Mama used to call the wee hours of the morning the witching hour. There are wraiths who wake when the clock strikes two. They tiptoe into your sleep, taunting until you wake with real screams scraping out your throat, chased by the desperate prayer that the navniki ghosts aren't real and the past won't come crawling into bed with you.

They are the reasons I'm standing at the edge of the cherry orchard again, panting, breath puffing into vapor trails as I try to shake off the memory singed into my closed eyelids. The frigid sting of Michigan's April air burns my lungs, trying to anchor me in the present. But the smell of distant smoke tinges my nostrils and drags me under the dark spell.

It's just the neighbor's wood stove. Just a wood stove.

Unfortunately the mantra has never worked well.

One hand clutches the Polar Star necklace Mama painted for me, and the other presses against the jagged bark of the oak tree, my confidant. My palm hungers for the strength, the sharpness of the only other memory keeper on the edgelands. With her crown soaring above the field, the tree has seen everything and cradles the memories of generations.

I heave in a breath and hold it, slowing my heart rate. I breathe out. The rush is a cold mimic of billowing smoke. Above me, the spreading branches groan in witness and solidarity with her familiar nightwalker.

I clutch the wool blanket to my chest and touch the sole of a trailing shoe bound in her arms.

"We would change things if we could," I whisper to the oak. But we are powerless...or at least I am.

The tips of the tree stretch, narrow, and there, at the first breath of nothing, is the potential, the thing each branch is becoming. I wonder what is at the end of myself. What is on the other side? How many times have I stood here wishing for a different ending?

A hundred nights?

A thousand?

How many times have I seen the ghosts of the lost children drift between the moonlit trees and through the discarded scrap of Dad's old mechanic's garage and smithy?

Being responsible for their murder is a heavy burden to bear.

I breathe in the crisp air, purposefully long and slow, waiting for the panic to die. With my stores perilously low, I have to be up again in a few brief hours to plant seeds under the cold frame. Though I'm loath to admit it, I won't be able to make do much longer.

Not that many will notice if I disappear.

I glance toward town, hidden behind the trees. A few weeks ago, my childhood guardian, Sebastian, suggested I apply for a job. Like I can just materialize on Main Street as if nothing ever happened. No, the Cueny family has lived on this ground, pouring in our blood and tears, for generations. For better or worse, I will not step across the boundary, will not find out what is beyond the edge.

Above me, my ravens grumble from their perch, and I smile at the scant welcome of my friends, reminding me that they too saw, and they too hold the truth behind their onyx eyes.

Ravens are smarter than most people realize, with a complicated system of communication and loyalties. Grip, the male, and by extension, his partner, are loyal to me.

I twist my long dark hair into a knotted bun, then wrap my hands around the lowest oak branch and heave myself into her wooden embrace. When I was younger, Mama, my sister, and I built a small platform high in the crook of the oak's arms where we watched the electric lights twinkle along Main Street, petering into darkness on either side.

Sisi and I dreamed of getting out. Back then, my dad was the one holding us captive. Back then, I laughed at Mama's stories of a many-headed dragon with an insatiable appetite and the Baba Yaga, the wintery forest witch who decides who is worthy of help and who will not survive. I'd once hoped to be the girl, lost in the woods, who found mercy from the forest witch. But I no longer wish for the Baba Yaga's fire. She didn't just save, she destroyed.

A chilly breeze from Lake Michigan whispers across the land, clunking together the shoes clutched in the oak's fingers. Bumps shiver up my arms—the trail of a navniki's nail across my neck. I gather the blanket tight around me, wishing I could tuck the forest around me too. Why did I not bring the shotgun with me?

In the distance, quiet laughter dances with the rapid-fire crunch of someone...no, multiple someones running. I mold myself against the trunk. Grip utters a guttural warning in clicks and murmurs, his black feathers fanning. My blood warms in warning. It isn't just kids.

I should shut my eyes. If I don't see the wraith, he can't be real. My lids refuse to close, fear betraying me again as I study the darkness.

He is coming. I can smell his burnt edges.

Red shadows flicker in the woods by the creek, answered by others, louder from the opposite direction toward town.

The shadow by the creek, my ghost, flickers and disappears just as the others coalesce into solid forms. Six of them. Much more dangerous and much more real than any imagined restless spirit. I shrink deeper into the shadows.

I hadn't expected them.

Of course teenagers come to the farm occasionally. Armed with rolls of toilet paper, gruesome tales, and irreverent ignorance. Over the years, they've even added shoes to the branches as if their pathetic accusations might shame me into admitting I am a murderer.

They've never come together before—the ghost and the teens. Why did he lead them here? I rub the prickling hairs on my neck. I will simply wait them out as usual.

"Over here." A quiet voice crackles against the darkness. How is he already under my safe haven?

"I dare you to touch it." Another voice, deeper still than the first.

"The raven tree?" A girl's voice giggles. A flash of lantern light reveals a girl, sixteen or seventeen, her skirt scandalously short even by 1965 standards. Her straight hair is captured in a high, swinging ponytail. Even though she is scared, she's grinning.

"Of course the raven tree." The deeper voice. "They say it's haunted." The boy steps into the ring of light cast by his lantern, the yellow and blue of his letterman's jacket muted by the night. "My dad says Colwyn Cueny's a raven witch who sucked out the souls of a hundred kids, then burned the repair shop down around them. He says the tree calls up the navniki demons to hunt the innocent."

I bristle, white-knuckle ramming down the anger. He's only repeating things I already know—I am the stuff of legends, the crazy witch at the edge of town with dead children walking the fields at night. But the tree? The guardian does not deserve this.

Frustration and anger burst from my tight hold, climbing my throat, acrid and burning, building with the fuel of my nightmares.

"Dad says she tortured them before she killed her brother-in-law and his kids, and that's why the fog comes up so thick out here. It's their ghosts trying to smoke out the devil witch like she did them. If the wind's right, you can still smell the fire."

A dog bays in the distance, calling for the dead. My ravens grumble against the sound. It isn't time.

"My mom says she's the Baba Yaga," another girl says.

"That's not true." The girl's giggle is less sure now.

The boy shrugs, elegant in his lies from the pit of hell. "Both her mom and her sister were crazy, even one of the runts is crazy. One day she just snapped and instead of killing herself—"

"Lies! Those are all lies!" I burst to my feet, arms spread wide, transforming into their Baba Yaga, the witch of the woods, come to life. Grip and his mate startle, shrieking metallic sounds, unearthly prophecies, from the harbingers of death, even as the oak draws from the underworld and groans under me. We will give them a real story to tell.

The girl screams, her voice climbing as she runs. Grip and Merlina take flight, black wings wide, covering the moon, diving wolf birds from the sky. Still the boys pick up stones and hurl them at us, laughing as I cower.

Die. Their voices join my ghost's.

If they only knew how I wish for the same.

Die.

A stone strikes the branch, my feet twisting with the impact. Then I am falling.

Falling.

Falling.

The desperate fingers of my oak reach out, try to slow my descent, cracking with the effort until the ground reaches up and plucks me from the sky.



I WAKE TO SEBASTIAN clucking over me...again.

Though the crooked smile is the same as it was the last time I was in the hospital, this time he's older, solidly gray, and more wrinkled.

But the lights above me are exactly as I remember—impossibly bright white as he restrains me.

Screams pierce my ears. My own terror echoes back to a decade ago. The past folding into the present. My entire body courses with pain, and I give in, slipping beneath.

Help me. Help me.

A woman in a white nurse's hat pierces my arm with a needle, and all goes blessedly dark.

I am splintering against the witching hour, the darkness welcome.



TWO

The Raven Tree

She carries death with her, the human woman.

I cannot see if the shadow is inside, leaking out, or outside, leaking in. Regardless, the slick of it coats her skin, sucking her dry.

Unlike her, I am made for long periods of darkness, to breathe in the winter and then expel the cold with the spring tide. But she cannot survive the dark.

The Ancients called me the tree of life, and I bear many names: the Dub, the Crann Bethadh, the Ished.

In the beginning, they believed the sky was too low, people and animals alike crawling underneath the weight...until I grew, pushing, muscling the sky upward, making room for the world. While my deep roots curl into the nav underworld of shadowed memory, my trunk proclaims mortality, and my crown holds the sky and braces the god of thunder.

Perhaps I may have played host to the gods when I stood as one amongst many oaks, our roots entwined, energy pulsing between us. But humans long ago stripped the land. My decimated sisters were sent south to rebuild a mighty city smoking in ruin. Humans burned the tongue of truth, and the gods fell silent.

I wept alone for generations, my roots aching from the cracks of warning, my leaves curling against the scent of destruction. I merely existed until the woman's mother whispered under my branches, pleading with me to awaken and see.

And I did. I felt her tiny human child hovering in my branches—the

very one now drowning with shadows. My sap reawakened the memories of the stories of raising another to the heavens. The myths and legends echoed over and over in time and space, trailing back, joining the splintered world's myths all the way back to the hazy beginning of time.

One thing I know: she is meant for life.

Yet she ran from who she was prophesied to be, from who she and her sister had become. One, the Midnight Sister. The other, the Sister of the Dawn. One to call the dead home. The other to comfort them in sleep.

Those bound to the old stories never do fare well in the wider world, and the fire eclipsed the truth.

That fire awakened me, gave me the power to speak, and also bestowed two realizations: I am dying. And one sister of the sky cannot possibly hold the dragon's leash alone.

If I do not soon empower the next guardian, the sky will collapse, and the underworld will burst open.

I hear the god Veles rattle my roots, looking for weakness, and I pray Perun will come to my aid soon.



THREE

April 14, 1965

"You're a fool idiot, Marcus. You know who that woman is?"

Sheriff Jacob Benoit leans against the peeling doorframe of Marcus Lenarsic's new office. Every inch of the sheriff—from his wide-brimmed hat hiding military-short hair to his paunch to his scuffed cowboy boots—screams small-town police.

"And you claim not to be a respecter of persons," Marcus mutters and shuts the case folder in front of him. Petty theft can wait. Besides, the county judge doesn't want to see the new uppity, city-boy prosecutor in his chambers again anytime soon.

"Got nothing to do with respect. Got to do with history. Dangerous history. And you"—the sheriff shoves his bulk away from the door and brushes a finger across the nonexistent dust on Marcus's nameplate—"being an outsider, and all, should at least look like you're not consorting with criminals while also claiming to uphold the law."

Claiming to uphold the law. As if Marcus is some kind of charlatan. He shoves a fist into his wool overcoat. Benoit is insufferable.

But—Marcus straightens the collar of his jacket—Marcus hadn't become a top-notch lawyer by reacting to the goading of a two-bit county sheriff. They're supposed to be a team—sheriff and assistant prosecutor. Marcus isn't quite sure how to work with the man yet. He will find a way though. He has no choice.

"Thank you for your concern, Sheriff." Marcus raps his knuckles on the scuffed desktop. "Uncle Sebastian is the one who arranged for me to stay on Colwyn Cueny's farm. I knew her as a kid, and we got on fine. I'm sure—"

"Sebastian's a good man and a good doctor, but he's always had a...soft spot...for Colwyn and her sister. His judgment might not always be the best when it comes to those two. She's a murderer, and her sister's crazy enough to be locked up."

Marcus bites back a retort that Elizabeth was likely pushed over the edge by her psychotic husband...may he not rest in peace. "Even you admit you have no proof against Colwyn." Marcus locks the filing cabinet and deposits the keys into his coat pocket.

"Just because I can't prove it in a court of law doesn't mean it isn't true." The sheriff digs a cigarette box from his shirt pocket and taps out a Camel. "You know that better than most, I suspect." He watches Marcus behind half-closed lids as he strikes a match. It flares. The sulfuric smell fills the space for half a heartbeat, the promise of warmth swallowed by the glowing cigarette tip. Marcus waits. The man is fishing for a story, for Marcus to give something away, but Marcus hadn't become a big fish lawyer in Chicago by swallowing hooks, lines, or sinkers.

The sheriff nods his momentary defeat. "Fact is, she threatened her brother-in-law with a shotgun, and, if you take a look at the records, even Elizabeth says—"

"If it'll make you feel better, I'll study the case notes," Marcus says, offering the olive branch. "But if you couldn't find anything, I doubt I will." While Marcus isn't sure this is strictly true, the concession seems to mollify the man. Marcus has read the brief, but he does have questions the more in-depth files might answer.

"Here." The sheriff shoves a thick folder at the attorney. "Don't read it alone at night. All the talk of a forest witch...you'll have nightmares for a month and never light another fire in your life."

Marcus raises a skeptical eyebrow. People do change, but a forest witch?

"And," Benoit grips the doorknob, "careful of drinking any of her concoctions. Bunch of mumbo jumbo if you ask me."

"Thanks for the warning." Marcus takes the file and doesn't tell the man he's already skimmed the notes and has seen worse. "At the moment, my uncle's basement is flooded. I don't have much choice

unless I want to sleep with the chickens." And Marcus has never heard of anyone being injured by chamomile or mint tea.

"Doctor VanderLaan." The voice of the city hall secretary shooting around the corner is missing her normal sugar coating. "You can't bring a rooster in here."

"Her name is Frank." Marcus's Uncle Sebastian has a voice that might very well wake the dead and has, at least temporarily, put an end to the debate about Colwyn's innocence or guilt.

"It isn't sanitary." Annabelle's heels click across the linoleum floor in a rapid-fire chase of Uncle Sebastian.

"She's wearing a diaper. Very sanitary." Uncle Sebastian appears at the end of the hall, just within Marcus's line of sight through the open office door. He adjusts the creature in his arms. "And she's a chicken, not a rooster."

The sheriff raises an eyebrow and leans into the hall. "But its name is Frank."

In the distance, Marcus hears a muffled snort of laughter. No doubt Lieutenant Wakefield—the one bright spot in the office. Marcus stifles a laugh too.

"We covered that." Sebastian is completely unperturbed as he pops a pumpkin seed in his mouth and then holds out another for the chicken.

"But…" Annabelle rounds the corner, and her gaudy red pumps stop their forward motion. Her matching red lips twist into a confused frown.

Uncle Sebastian eludes the secretary and slides past Benoit, pausing just long enough for Frank to peck at the sheriff's badge. At the ping of metal, the chicken fluffs her feathers with obvious pride, and Sebastian gives his nephew a wicked grin. Apparently Marcus's attitude toward the sheriff is inherited through his mother's side.

"And to quiet all the grumbling, Colwyn Cueny," Sebastian intones as if giving a lecture in a university, "has an empty room in her barn and, on account of her broken leg, could use some help here and there. My nephew needs a place to stay and is a capable worker who has a rather light caseload at the moment. It's a win-win situation."

Frank clucks her approval, but Annabelle's eyes go wide in horror.

The sheriff shakes his head and swings out the door. Sebastian steps inside the office and shuts the door with a shrug.

Why would Sebastian's ward cause so much concern in town? What do they know that Marcus doesn't?

Marcus remembers the Cueny sisters as raven-haired twins with a love for climbing trees, spinning their mother's stories, and floating in the water. The one was smarter than anyone he knew with a wickedly dry sense of humor, and the other was quiet, observant, and sweet as the ice cream served at Tempting Treats. Perfect friends for a boy staying with his uncle on the lakeshore. Sure, they didn't pal around with most of the town kids, and neither Colwyn nor Elizabeth answered Marcus's letters, but he doesn't believe the whispers.

He is quite certain that Colwyn Cueny is no murderer of children.

Marcus tucks the thick folder into his briefcase. The file only contains the police and court transcripts and the admittance notes for Elizabeth, but maybe Marcus will find something to clear Colwyn's name and set her free from the accusations. And if he can set her free, then maybe the two of them can spring Elizabeth from the Traverse City State Hospital...especially given the new federal mental health laws. Gone are the days when a husband or father could send away a woman merely on his say-so. Thank goodness.

Marcus straightens the lapels on his wool jacket just so.

"Jacob Benoit was friends with Jeremiah." Uncle Sebastian scrutinizes the door as if the sheriff might be listening at the keyhole. "Which is the only history that matters to him. He'd say anything to cast a bad light on Colwyn to distract from what Jeremiah did." Frank flutters in seeming agreement, and Uncle Sebastian squints at the clock on the wall. "Hurry up now, or we'll be late. Colwyn'll put up with most things except making her wait."

And that Marcus remembers from when they were kids. He trails his uncle out of his office and nods at Lieutenant Wakefield, who is doing his best not to chuckle at the odd parade. Marcus waves off the man's wink with a wry smile, returning the man's good humor.

At least Marcus has one ally inside the squat office building. If only Wakefield had an extra place for Marcus to bunk. Alas, Wakefield has a wife and a house full of kids. Which means Marcus is

doomed to slide into Sebastian's enormous Buick and set off for haunted places.

In the car, they're lucky to find any station considering the cloud cover, and the radio crackles behind Ray Charles's blues chords. The moody melody answers Marcus's own heart's song. A partner in his regret. What he wouldn't do to be at a Ray Charles concert. Instead, he's sitting in a car as Uncle Sebastian crawls through town, a hair past the main intersections, then turns off Pine Road onto a dirt track.

Marcus flips open the folder and skims the first page of notes Benoit has compiled.



Admittance Notes
Traverse City State Hospital
Attending Dr. Randall Childers
Patient: Elizabeth Delmar
April 30, 1955

The patient, a female in her twenties, was referred to the psychiatric hospital by the burn ward. She is suicidal and shows signs of a psychological breakdown. Her husband, one Jeremiah Delmar, had already scheduled her to be remanded to our custody prior to the fire.

The fire marshal discovered the bones of Jeremiah, along with the subject's two male children, in the debris of the fire. At this time, the events surrounding the fire are unclear, as the stories from both the patient and her sister continue to shift.

Patient is unrepentant of any of the crimes she is accused of, only repeating the sentiment that everything is her sister's fault and that she is not crazy.

She is, however, cooperative, only showing signs of violence at night, when she talks to herself and rails against the doors, screaming that the Zmey dragon has escaped. Continued observation suggested for possible hysterical tendencies and delusions.

In my medical opinion, she is not psychologically able to submit to police questioning at this time.

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