

Witches

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Witches

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Summary

Every respectable town needs a witch.

Notes

This is one of our longer WIPs. I really like the idea and the world building that we did, but we got stuck and didn't know where to go once we'd set up the premise. There'll be 7 chapters.

Chapter 1

Every respectable town needed a witch.

It was a saying Sharon had heard since she was a little girl, usually from her aunt. Back then, it had been understood. A town needed a witch, to help with everything from crops to house building to child birth. At least, that was the sentiment among the country towns. The little places that still depended on the earth for prosperity. The ones where the rules of society and class structure were a little blurred. That was the realm of the witches. They took care of their towns and guarded the soft spots in the earth and everything has seemed peaceful.

Now, of course, there were many towns without a witch. The war that has eaten Sharon's teenage years had left their numbers decimated and the land scarred. Now there were many towns without a witch for miles. And perhaps their crops didn't thrive as they once did and their houses rocked more in the weather. But for the most part, they got by.

And then there were towns like Triskelion, which had three of them.

Trisk, as it was known to the locals, had been the site of the last great battle of the war. The woods that curved around the west edge of the town had been soaked with magic and blood, a potent combination. It left the area dangerous for witch and human alike, and in need of guardians.

The town called them the Sisters on the Hill, which was a misnomer in both ways. They weren't sisters and while they lived on the far edge of the town, it could hardly be called a hill. Their house had belonged to Sharon's aunt, a large, sprawling estate held together with luck and spells. She had fond memories of living there as a girl, when her parents had died. There were doors she hadn't been allowed to open and rooms she'd never explored, but for the most part it was comfortable, familiar. The bannister was still smooth wood, shiny with age and the touch of hundreds of hands. There was a series of notches in the door jamb of the green parlor, marking Sharon's height as she'd grown. And the portrait of her aunt hung in the upstairs hallway, mischief dancing in her eyes and a faint smile tugging her lips. The backyard had no fence, despite the carefully planted and thriving garden, instead spilling out into the woods that they now guarded.

Sharon shared the house with two other powerful witches, both veterans of the war, both protégées of her aunt. Amanda was the older of the two, though Sharon had no idea how old she truly was as she had always looked as she did now, save for the scar that now marred her cheek, a souvenir of the battle that had changed the woods and killed Aunt Peggy. Amanda was an Earth witch, and they tended to be a little ageless, especially one as powerful as Amanda. She had taken Peggy's place as the head of the coven after the war, though with the witches thin on the ground as they were, the position was far more ceremonial than political.

Natasha had been Peggy's righthand woman in the war, despite the whispers about her on both sides of the fight. Despite being called everything from a double agent to traitor, Nat's loyalty had never wavered. Sharon thought Nat missed Peggy as much as she did. But Nat

kept her emotions tightly covered, as all good fire witches did. Natasha had been with Sharon when Peggy had been slain, had helped carry her body to the back of line, where Amanda had abandoned her medic duties to meet them. In that moment a bond had been formed between the three of them, as the last burst of magic had left Peggy's body and flooded them. Together they had helped turn the tide of the war. Together, Sharon suspected, they could accomplish anything.

That had been two years ago. Mourning and rebuilding had taken up the first year. Sharon was the last of the Carter line and there had been demands on her from all the families. She'd never had her aunt's diplomatic touch, but she'd learned enough to not offend anyone she'd visited. Having Amanda at her side had helped.

There were other spots that were scarred like the forest. The world had always had spots where reality seemed a bit . . . thin. Where magic ran strongly and powerful spells could be forged. Amanda called them soft places. Witches had guarded such places for as long as anyone could remember. The war had created new ones, and the magics that ran in those places was often wild and chaotic.

Amanda had made sure all the soft places had guardians, so that no mortals could stumble into them. The reputation of witches was fragile now and they couldn't afford any accidents. While most of the places were small and subtle enough a single witch was enough, the woods to the west of Trisk were large and had always been a little off. The locals had a dozen or more legends about the place. Wolves that talked and houses that walked. Men who lured people away with the song of a flute. Clearly the fabric of the world had always been thin there. The battle had ripped the threads even farther, leaving holes. On certain nights, when the moon was dark, Sharon swore she could hear whispering.

"Are you sure about this?"

Hands deep in the dirt she crouched in, Amanda peered up at her, face shadowed by the brim of her bonnet. "The placement might be a little close, but I want to fit in as many as possible. If I notice them struggling I can pull a few."

"I mean planting fruit trees so close to the wood." Sharon squinted at the trees before looking back to her friend. "Aren't they going to be poisonous or soporific or something?"

"The wild magic doesn't cross the line." Amanda pointed to the thick line of chalk that lined the edge of the woods. "And my orchard will stop a good twenty feet before it."

"Still awful close. What if the chalk stops working?"

"I'll know long before the magic reaches my trees." She looked down to continue covering the roots of the sapling. "And if not I will *certainly* know when it reaches the trees." Sharon had a touch of nature magic, but it was mostly limited to getting certain delicate flowers to bloom, not the bone deep understanding Amanda had.

"Besides," Amanda continued, giving the dirt one more pat. "If the chalk stops working we'll have more to worry about than the fruit trees."

“That’s when we burn the land and salt the earth,” Natasha said, picking her way down the path.

“Fire is not the answer to every one of life’s problems,” Amanda told her, moving on to the next sapling.

“Spoken like a true earth witch,” she teased back. She bent to peer at the saplings. “What are we growing?”

“This row is apple. The other one is plums. I’m going to try some figs and nuts as well.”

“Sounds like we’ll be making pies,” Sharon said. “Assuming they grow.”

Amanda glanced at her, gracefully rolling up to her feet. “They’ll grow.” All of Amanda’s plants grew, strong and healthy. She sold cuttings to those in town who asked for them and while they didn’t thrive as ridiculously as her own, they were always hearty and long lived.

“Speaking of pies,” Nat said as the three of them walked back to the house. “Whatever Nell is cooking smells divine.”

When they’d first moved in, they’d attempted to care for the house themselves. They was all wary of strangers and uncertain how the townspeople would feel about working for witches. But after six weeks of trying to choke down Amanda’s cooking, wearing stained clothes Sharon simply couldn’t get clean, and coughing every time Nat forgot to open the flue *before* starting the fire they conceded all the power in the world didn’t make them good housekeepers. Inquiries had been met with surprising enthusiasm. Nat thought, rather cynically, Sharon felt, that people were just curious to see the inside of the house. They’d ended up with a live-in cook and two girls that came regularly to clean and do the laundry. Looking at Amanda’s skirts streaked with mud Sharon was considering slipping the laundress a few extra coins.

They reached the back courtyard and Amanda paused to use the pump to rinse off the worst of the mud from her hands. “You think of the chalk line as a wall, a cage,” she said to Sharon. “Something containing the magic that it claws and pushes against. That’s now how it works. It’s a boundary line. The wild magic has its territory and understands that this is ours. As long as we respect that line, so will it.”

Sharon glanced back at the woods. “Have you been in there? Since the battle?”

“A few times,” she said, shaking water droplets off her hands. Nat leaned forward and blew on them, drying them. “It’s a good place to recharge. To find an answer to something you’re stuck on. You should try it some time. Wild magic loves air as much as earth.”

She couldn’t say if her reluctance to venture past the chalk was because of the unpredictability of the magic, or the dark memories of battle. Still, she knew Amanda was right. Magic wasn’t inherently evil or inherently good. It only mattered how a welder used it. Yes, the power in the woods was intense, but she was a Carter, she could manage it, especially with the others guiding her.

Looking over at Nat, she asked, “Do you ever go?”

The red-haired witch laughed. “No, thank you. I have more than enough power of my own to deal with. I don’t need to wade through more.” Pulling open the back door, she gestured for them to proceed her inside. “But I agree with Amanda. We should take you out there sometime.”

The two of them so rarely agreed on anything, this almost certainly meant she’d be heading out into the woods sometime soon.

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Amanda had never wanted to be the head of a coven. She’d mostly just wanted to keep her head down and practice her craft. Instead she was sitting behind a desk with a stack of letters from the heads of a dozen houses, all with demands and advice she didn’t really want.

“If you could see the look on your face,” Nat said, leaning in the doorway of Amanda’s office. “If you were me, you’d be setting things on fire.”

“Don’t tempt me.” She picked up her cup of tea, only to find it cold and sighed, standing.

“What do earth witches do when they get angry? If you can’t start fires.”

Amanda arched a brow, planted her feet and sank her frustration down into the ground. The house trembled with the force of it, windows and decorations rattling.

Nat inclined her head. “Point taken.” She held out a hand for the tea cup. “Give.”

When she handed it back it was the perfect temperature for drinking. “Thank you.” She sipped it, but continued walking towards the kitchen. “The heads of house seem to have universally decided to harass me. They’d be more likely to get a positive response if they staggered their demands.”

“That sort of planning is why you lead the coven and not them.”

“I assure you, that is on their list of complaints.”

Nat was watching her in that way she had that meant she was seeing right through her. “Do those letters have anything to do with you encouraging Sharon to embrace the wild magic out there?”

With a sigh, Amanda set her cup on the kitchen table and scanned the larder shelves, trying to decide if she wanted a snack before bed. “The war broke out before Sharon was twenty, just as she was to start her last stage of training. Instead, she followed her aunt to war and spent the last years of her innocence living in mud and learning to use her power to kill. There are things she doesn’t know that she needs to know. How to handle wild magic is one. Her bond to this land is another.” Perhaps some bread and cheese.

She fetched the loaf and a hunk of hard cheese and brought them to the table. “This is her property, much as we all maintain it. Most of the ancestral lands were broken apart and

auctioned off, but Sharon had a clear family connection and I was loud, so she kept it, with us as her guardians, until she was married.”

“And now they want her to be married.” Nat said it with derision and the temperature of the room went up a degree or two.

“Very much so. I’ve received several applications for the position. I’ve been holding them off saying her training isn’t complete, but I think they’re going to get less polite, soon.” She fetched a knife and sat to make her snack. Nat took a chair across from her.

“She’s too young,” Nat said, stealing a piece of cheese.

Amanda arched a brow. “She’s twenty five. When you were her age you were seducing dark wizards for information.”

Nat shrugged negligently, as if that was a perfectly normal activity for a young lady. “And what were you doing? Watching the earth cool? Wooly mammoth tending?”

“I was on top of a mountain learning what plants grew in harsh climates,” she retorted, ignoring the jab at her age. All witches carried their years lightly, but earth witches especially scoffed at the reaper. Amanda looked the same as she had in this wild days on the mountain, save for her scars. She would likely look the same a decade hence. She’d lay good odds Nat had no idea how old she was and it needled her. Nat hated not knowing things.

“So we teach Sharon what she needs to know, introduce her to the land she belongs to and. . . what? Auction her off to the more prestigious family?”

“I’m hoping by that point she’ll have enough power to make her own choices. To find a man she actually wants to be with, or tell the elders where to stuff it.” Witches weren’t as aggressively patriarchal as the mundanes surrounding them. Wizards could be as strong as witches, but the power came in women more often than the men. When you were out numbered it was awfully hard to rule, though lord knew they tried.

Peggy had stayed single her whole life, leaving only a niece as her heir. Sharon could do the same if she wanted, though she would face more pressure that she would have before the war had decimated their numbers. Amanda would certainly prefer to be left alone for the rest of her days, but even she might start getting offers soon.

“As long as no one comes eyeing me,” Nat muttered, making Amanda laugh.

“I’m quite happy to be dried up old spinsters together.” Amanda stood and brought her cup and knife to the sink to rinse them. “Though if she does get married we may find ourselves looking for a new place to live.”

“Nonsense, this place is huge. We could hide out in the south wing and they’d never find us.”

The forest loomed beyond the kitchen window and Amanda had the odd feeling that it might be listening to them, somehow. Despite what she’d told Sharon she was never entirely sure if the power in the trees was malevolent, benevolent or something entirely neutral. She did

sense it was aware of them in the house and was, for want of a better word, curious. “Maybe the woods will take us in. We can build a house of gingerbread and lure plump children down dark thorny paths.” The tree branches seemed to rattle a bit, as if laughing with her.

Before Nat could respond they were both startled by a loud clatter. Amanda was a little amused to see that Nat immediately dropped into a fighter’s stance at the sound. A scan of the room revealed the broom that had been leaning on the wall next to the back door was now laying on the floor in front of the threshold.

“Broom falls,” Amanda said quietly, exchanging a glance with Nat. “Company’s coming.”

Chapter 2

In a previous life, Natasha had been a farmer.

Or, rather, her parents had been. It had been almost twenty years since her parents had died, but she still had dim memories of following her mother out to gather eggs and watching her father mend a fence. Looking back now, she suspected they both had a touch of earth magic in them, along with a simple, innate love of the land and no fear of hard work. Some of that still lived inside her, despite the years and pain she'd had since.

Her parents had had cattle. They didn't have room for that here, but they did have a healthy little flock of chickens, a goat of surprisingly temperate nature for milk, and a small herd of sheep they routinely sheared. Sharon had a knack with the spinning wheel and Amanda knew how to dye the yarn and weave it. They made most of their money through spells and charms, but the yarn and cloth sold well at market and gave them spare coin for luxuries.

If she was being honest, Nat was far more proud of the cloth goods than the witchery. With her caring for the sheep each bolt of cloth and skein of yarn had a bit of all three of them in it. The people in town seemed to think that made it lucky and, truth be known, clothes made of their wares tended to last a bit longer and wear a bit nicer.

They'd finished their shearing almost a month ago, ending up with a roomful of wool to work with. Now they were on the cusp of lambing season and Nat was running ragged checking up on all her pregnant ewes and making sure their shelters were in good condition and well stocked. In another week or so, she'd start dragging Amanda out to help with any labors they caught. Complications were rare, but they did happen, and the sheep seemed to find her calming.

For now, Nat was walking the perimeter of the land, looking for any stragglers. The fence ran along the road to the center of town. She waved to the neighbors she passed and grinned when she saw Sharon heading into town. "Getting supplies?"

"Flour," she said. "Amanda got a bunch of honey from the hives and wants to make a cake." She tilted the basket she was carrying to show a couple jars of honey tucked inside. "Figure I can swap for this. Do you need anything?"

Nat tilted her head, considering it. "I've had a craving for some smoked fish. If you see any."

Sharon wrinkled her nose a little but nodded. "I can do that."

"And some good gossip is always welcome."

That got a grin. "I can definitely do that." She waved and continued on her way. Nat lifted a hand and watched her a moment before heading along the fence.

It curved away from the road after a few more yards. Their closest neighbor was on the other side, but no one had lived in the house since long before the war. The fields were starting to

look a bit shabby. Maybe she could look into who owned it and work out an arrangement to have her sheep graze there for a season. Would do her land and theirs a favor.

As she came around the curve she heard the unmistakable bleat of a sheep in distress. Hurrying her steps she came around a large boulder that marked the halfway point of this side of the fence and saw one of her pregnant ewes belly deep in a sink hole. A man she didn't recognize was in there with her, trying to calm her down enough to help.

He looked up when she reached the edge of the hole. "Yours?"

She nodded, crouching down to catch the ewe's head and shush her. Amanda would be better for this, Nat was the opposite of soothing. But the animal knew and trusted her and was hopefully smart enough to know they were trying to help. "If you give her a shove I can pull and try to get her up."

The gentleman - whose rather nice looking if unadorned clothing was now ruined - nodded and put his shoulder under the ewe's rump. Nat gripped some of the loose skin around her shoulders and counted down from three while pulling. The ewe scrambled on the edge of the hole, but couldn't get any purchase. They succeeded only in splattering her rescuer with more mud.

"It's too slick," he said, straightening again. "She's just going to sink deeper unless it dries out."

Nat sighed and nodded. "All right, step back."

He looked at her askance, but obediently backed away from her and the sheep. She stretched a hand out over the mud and gathered up her power. She tapped into the annoyance the conversation about marriage and Sharon's future the night before had caused and felt the air around her hand heat up. In a few moments the mud had dried out into cracked, dusty earth.

Shaking her hand out, she nodded to the gentleman again. "One more try."

Surprise was clear on his face, all but confirming her assumption he was mundane. Any wizard his age would have seen dozens of acts of magic more interesting than that. Still, he stepped up and gave the ewe another good shove.

It took both of them, but the animal managed to climb up and out of the hole. Nat gave her a quick once over for injuries, then smacked it on the rump to get it running back towards the main part of the herd.

Reaching down, she helped the man out of the hole. "Thank you. That would have been far more of an ordeal on my own."

He inclined his head. "What are neighbors for?"

She arched her brows and glanced over at the long abandoned property. "You moved in there?"

“With some friends.” He seemed to think a moment. “You must be one of the witches on the hill.” With a gesture at her land behind her. “It’s not very hilly.”

“Well. The witches on the sheep farm doesn’t quite have the same ring to it.”

That got her a little smirk, which she suspected was the equivalent of a roaring laugh from another man. “Barton,” he said, holding out a hand.

She slid her hand into his. “Romanoff. Nice to meet you, neighbor.”

His hand was warm and rough with calluses. He squeezed hers lightly before releasing her. “I’m sure we’ll run into each other again.”

“I’d say it’s almost certain.”

He inclined his head again, then turned to stroll back towards the fence line.

Nat watched him a moment - that was a rather nice ass under those muddy slacks - then smirked and continued her path around the perimeter. Apparently, she was going to be the one with good gossip tonight at dinner.

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When Steve was a little boy, he made time stop.

It had been an accident. The sort of thing a child wished for and never expected to get. He didn't want to get out of bed and milk the cow. It was cold. So he willed the time to simply pause. And it had. He didn't realize it until he woke from the snooze he'd fallen back into, panicked because he knew his mother would be angry, only to realize it was still the same bare dawn outside.

He got up, got dressed, and searched the house. His mother was frozen, bent over the kettle she'd just pulled off the fire. No amount of shaking or shouting would get her to move. He ran out of the house, finding the livestock in the same state. He ran all the way to the village and found everyone there frozen.

In the middle of the square he shouted at the top of his lungs and no one moved. There was no magic in his family, but it was in him.

Took him forever to figure out how to restart the world.

Magic could pop up anywhere, no one really knew why it was in one person rather than another. There were some families that it ran in strong in, where it was almost guaranteed to produce witches. Steve's family had been farmers, made enough to get by, but there were lean times.

No one had every seen a time magician, not in recent memory, but there were mentions of them in old books and journals. It was enough to start his training. And training was enough to get him jobs. The time stopping became almost a parlor trick in comparison the other things he learned. How to protect houses and land, how to heal a wound or lift a curse.

Wizards as strong as him were rare and there were people - especially gentry - who thought wizards were more respectable than witches.

He'd paid off his families debts. Then bought them more land. Paid for workers. Then bought himself a sprawling estate in the country.

There had been another apprentice when he'd been training, of mundane origins like himself, that he'd become fast friends with. Bucky's power was metal—he could pull iron straight from the rock, and forge it without, well, a forge. He wasn't as strong as Steve, but his specialty was infinitely more useful. They made an excellent team.

"Seriously, Steve, we need to hire a maid. Maybe five maids. There are dust bunnies in my room big enough to ride."

How a man who'd been raised on the rough side of the city could be fastidious about a little dust, Steve had no idea.

"This place has been unoccupied for forty years," Steve replied. "Hire someone from the village."

Stepping into the house after their time away had been a bit like that first morning he'd stopped time. Everything frozen in place, exactly as he remembered it. The world had changed but the house had not.

Bucky sighed and carefully flipped the eggs he was cooking. "Talking to people was never my strong suit."

"How did I manage to acquire two compatriots who hate people?" He mused aloud.

"You're the only one who'll put up with us."

As if on cue, the kitchen door swung open to reveal their third member, Barton, pants caked in mud. "I met the neighbor."

"Did you have some sort of fight with him?" Steve asked, eyeing the mud.

"It was a her and I helped her get a sheep out of a hole." He looked down at his pants in dismay, then went to steal a hunk of bread off the table. "She's got magic. Dried out the mud."

"The south neighbors?" Now he had Steve's full attention. "The Witches?"

Barton nodded. "Said her name was Romanoff. Red hair. Mid twenties, maybe."

Bucky tipped his eggs out onto a plate. "I don't remember any Romanoffs, she must be like us. Not part of a family."

Then estate to the south was owned by the Carter family—or it had been in Steve's original time period, before his foolish leap forward. Superstitious people in town referred to them as a mysterious unit, but he'd assumed they were all Carters. That family had a lot of magic in

their lines. Though it had been a generation or two, perhaps it was someone else. "She say anything about the others?"

Barton shook his head. "Didn't seem the type to appreciate an interrogation. She was friendly enough, though."

"Maybe you should go say hello," Bucky offered.

Steve didn't fail to notice he'd said 'you' and not 'we'. "No thank you."

"You're not even a little curious?"

"If you want I can get cleaned up and head to town. See if I hear any gossip," Barton offered.

"I'm very curious. But some things ought to be left burried." He'd been to her grave. That was plenty.

Bucky and Barton exchanged a glance. "Well," Barton said. "I'm going to change anyway."

"I suppose as we live here things will trickle in," Bucky said, digging into his food. "Are we staying a while?"

Steve sighed heavily. "Where else would we go?"

"I don't know." He was quiet a moment. "It's hard for me too," he said finally, glaring at his plate. "There's a lot of memories here." Bucky had also lost someone, in the time leap forward.

He looked around. "Maybe we should redecorate."

"It couldn't hurt." He scraped up the last of his eggs and leaned back, sipping coffee. "It's all out of date now, anyway."

"Would solve the dirt problem."

"Probably still need to hire someone, huh?"

Steve shrugged. "We could probably do it if we really wanted to. But maybe providing some local employment isn't a bad thing."

"Might earn us some good will. They already have a trio of mysterious witches, I doubt they have room for a group of eccentric gentlemen."

He got up out of his chair, feeling oddly restless. "There's probably enough magic here for ten towns."

"The whole place is seeped in it," Bucky agreed. "More than I remember. It's enough to make my skin itch."

"You want to leave?"

He blew out a breath. "I don't know. There's something to be said for starting over fresh somewhere. Is there anything holding us here? Other than bittersweet memories?" With another sigh, he added, "On the other hand, when memories are all you have. . ."

"I'd need to sell the estate, we couldn't just walk off."

Bucky squinted at him a moment. "Do you want to go?"

"No, but it's my fault we're here. You're here. So if you want to. . .I'll go."

He seemed to consider that a moment. "I want to find out what happened to her," he said finally. "I assume she died in the war. You know she'd have been up at the front lines, just like Peg. After that. . . I don't know. Maybe with some closure the memories will be more comfort."

"All right," Steve said. "Maybe we can get Barton to interrogate his new friend."

Bucky nodded. "Seemed like he might be all right with that."

Chapter 3

Amanda didn't see much of her housemates until suppertime. Sharon went to town, Nat was busy in the fields and Amanda, regrettably, had to spend most of the afternoon in her office answering letters. Each one took several tries as she tried to toe the line between firmly polite and bitingly sarcastic. She felt she managed it, for the most part.

It was emotionally taxing, though, and left her drained. She was feeling every inch her years when she sat down to a plate heaped with meat and mashed potatoes. Whatever they paid Nell it wasn't enough.

"I met the neighbor," Nat said.

Sharon looked over at her, clearly interested. "To the north? Someone finally moved in there?"

Nat nodded. "Gentleman named Barton. Helped me get one of the ewes out of a hole. Said he was living there with some friends."

"We should go introduce ourselves." Sharon looked at Amanda. "Shouldn't we?"

Her stomach had turned sour, but she forced a smile, fingers fidgeting with the chain at her neck. "Perhaps we'll give them some time to settle in. No one wants witches showing up at their door before they've unpacked."

"He was mundane," Nat said. "So. . . possibly."

Amanda had to admit, it prickled a little to have mundanes living in that house. "That place had been empty almost forty years. They have their work cut out for them, getting it back into shape."

"You ever been over there?"

"When I first came here to train with Peggy, yes." She rubbed her thumb along the little charm she wore on a necklace. "She knew the wizard who owned the house."

"She had a thing with him," Sharon said. "And then he just vanished. She always spoke of him fondly."

"Yes, she did." Amanda speared some of her steak with her fork. "Steven Rogers. He'd been born to a mundane family but was very strong. Peggy's father disapproved, but Rogers was gone before it came to much more than flirtation."

"So he just ran off?" Nat loved gossip.

Amanda swirled a pattern through her potatoes. "No one was certain. He wasn't the type to just run off, but a good friend of his disappeared at the same time." Her voice was steady as a

rock, somehow. "As I said, he was very powerful wizard. It's possible some spell got the better of him."

"That stuff scares me," Sharon said. "Getting trapped in a spell."

"It's rare," Amanda told her. "But it does happen."

"There's all kinds of horror stories about fire witches," Nat said, topping off her wine. "Usually gruesome."

"I can see that, yeah."

"Not to give in to my spinsterhood, but that's not entirely dinner conversation," Amanda pointed out. "Does anyone have anything more pleasant to discuss?"

"I do," Sharon said, after a moment's thought. "Mrs. Pine's son is getting married and building a new house for his bride. She wants us to come do a charm on it before it's finished."

Nat arched a brow. "All of us?"

Sharon nodded. "Said money was no object."

Mrs. Pine's family had a few low-level witches in it, if Amanda remembered correctly. She'd always respected the town witches. "We'll have to cook up a good one for them."

"Remember the last one we did for newlyweds?" Nat asked. "Husband is asking to bless him with lots of sons, and the wife is behind him emphatically shaking her head."

Amanda laughed. "And came to me the next week for birth control advice. I'm waiting for him to come demand to know what's wrong with her."

"Depends on how he asks. If he's a jerk about it. . . there are plenty of places to hide a body."

"I'm sure the woods would take him," Amanda said thoughtfully. "If we explained properly."

"You two are terrible influences on me," Sharon muttered.

"We're training you to be just," Nat said. "Which by it's nature requires you to be just a touch evil."

"People come to us for help," she protested. "Not to judge them."

Amanda steepled her fingers. "And for something as simple as house blessing, there's no need. Most people deserve a little good fortune, since the world won't give it to them on its own. But there must be a balance between intent and impact. A man wants a dozen sons, that's fine for him, he doesn't have to push them out into the world. You have to weigh the impact of the spell, not just intent."

“Also, it’s bad to upset the balance in the world,” Nat said. “A dozen sons and no daughters? It would throw the whole village out of whack in 20 years. And I also think it says something unsavory about his character.”

"Is that why you don't do love spells?"

Nat nodded. "Most of the time they don't work anyway, and when they do-" She shuddered and made a face. "It's better to leave matters of the heart and crotch alone, if you ask me."

Amanda covered her eyes with a hand as Sharon laughed. "You have such a way with words, Romanoff."

“I feel like there have to be some valid requests for a crotch spell, though.”

"Ehh, that's more Amanda's deal." Nat gestured at her with her wine glass. "Fertility and the lack thereof."

“Can you do that?” Sharon asked. “Help somebody get pregnant?”

"Depends on why it's not happening. But in most cases, yes, I can help things along."

“Amanda can do just about anything,” Nat said. “Except maybe raise the dead.”

Sharon looked at her expectantly, so she just sipped her wine with her best mysterious smile. "Necromancy is generally frowned upon in polite society."

“I suppose even if you could, it would only be the body. You can’t return the soul. So you have a reanimated corpse.”

"There are records of it happening," Amanda said, getting both of their attentions. "It was centuries ago, in a different country. They were burning witches and in an attempt to escape a small coven raised the dead from the graveyard. The corpses staggered into the town and in the confusion the witches fled."

Mouth hanging open, Sharon said, "Then what happened?"

"Nothing much. The living managed to destroy the corpses sufficiently they couldn't move any longer. The spell wore off by noontime and they reburied the dead." She sipped her wine again. "Have you ever seen a moldering corpse? They're not particularly hearty."

Nat made a face. “That’s just really disgusting.”

"Magic's not pretty."

“On that lovely note,” Sharon said. “I think I’ve had enough wine and am going to bed.”

"Pleasant dreams," Amanda said, getting an eye roll as Sharon stood up.

“Me too,” Nat said. She looked at Amanda. “You staying up? You want light?”

"Yes, thank you. I have letters to finish. And books to read."

She flicked her fingers and the lamps flared. Their lamps didn't have any oil or any other fuel in them, they just burned on Nat's magic. They always had however much light they needed.

Amanda nodded her thanks and Nat excused herself as well. Taking a moment to finish her wine, Amanda stood and left the dining room. She intended to go to her office, but found herself in the back garden instead, staring to the north. There was a large garden and sheep fields between her and the Rogers estate, but she could see a faint glow of light that must be the house.

She ached, deep inside, when she thought too hard about that time. It was a lifetime ago and she should let it go. She *needed* to let it go. Maybe having people living there again would help. Exorcise the ghosts.

There was a large orange tree in the front garden at the Rogers. It had always been finicky. Probably hadn't produced useable fruit in decades. Crouching low, Amanda sank her fingers into the soil and stretched her magic out, letting it dance along root networks and ant tunnels till she found that particular tree. Sure enough, it was dormant, cranky from years of neglect. She let magic twine through the roots and trunk and felt a little *snap* as the branches blossomed.

Pulling back, she withdrew her hand from the earth, shaking soil off. If the new owners were mundane they might be confused, or not notice at all. It was her version of a housewarming gift. A new start.

Satisfied the ache had eased a little, she turned and went back inside to work on her letters.

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Rogers and Barnes had decided they wanted to renovate their dilapidated mansion, and somehow Clint had ended up in charge of hiring laborers to get the task underway. Eventually they were going to have to do something with their acres and acres of fallow fields, but it was too late to plant for this season.

Or. . . maybe crops would just appear magically. Because apparently the half-dead orange tree was now full of fruit. It was weird enough he decided to go back inside.

"Hey, did anyone notice we have oranges?"

They exchanged a look, then looked back at him. "I know about the tree," Rogers said. "But it was never one for bearing fruit."

Clint folded his arms over his chest. "All evidence to the contrary."

Without another word, Barnes jumped up and rushed out the door, all but knocking Clint over in the process. Rogers stood, sighing a little and they followed him out.

The tree was still heavy with oranges and Barnes was standing underneath it, eyes wide with something between joy and fear. He looked over at them. "I *has* to be her, Steve."

"There are a lot of earth witches in the world, Buck."

"You know how she felt about this tree. It was her god-damned nemesis. No one else could ever get it to spit out a blossom, let alone this."

"It's been forty years," he said carefully. "Plenty long enough for a child who inherited her magic to grow into it."

Barnes *clearly* didn't like that. He glared up at the tree.

Clint wasn't getting involved in this, but it brought up a good point. "Anybody who can do this could probably get the fields to grow something, right? Even with the late planting?"

"Yes," Rogers said, before looked back at Bucky. "If it were her she'd be very old. But. . .I admit I didn't come across a grave."

"Worth checking," Barnes said. "Either way, Barton's right. If we don't want to stare at fallow fields for three seasons, we need an earth witch. I can get the soil favorable, but can't make anything grow."

"And it looks like one is nearby, but it sounds like there's drama?"

The other two exchanged one of their looks. Then Barnes nodded and Rogers said, "Before we jumped, Bucky was. . . courting an earth witch who lived at the Carter estate. She was strong enough to do something like this. Or make the fields grow."

"When we got back I asked about her, but no one knew what had happened," Barnes added. "Only that she'd fought in the war."

"You want me to go see if the neighbor knows?" She'd been really pretty. He wouldn't mind seeing her again.

"That's a good idea," Rogers said before Barnes could open his mouth. "She'll know of any other witches in the area."

Clint nodded. "I'll see what I can find." He was looking for an old woman. Or a young woman that might be the old woman's daughter. That's what it sounded like, anyway. He was now very curious what the odds were said daughter was Barnes's, but he wasn't poking that hornet's nest.

It was mid morning, which meant the redhead would probably be out with the sheep again. Clint cut across their fields and hopped the fence as he had the day before. Chances of finding her just ambling about randomly were slim, but the land was flat and visibility good. He figured that hair would stand out pretty far.

Sure enough, he spotted her in a paddock near the house, trying to corral a very pregnant ewe into a fenced area. He hiked towards her. "You need a hand?" he called.

She didn't even look surprised he was there. "Yes. Do you happen to speak stubborn sheep?"

"No, but I am probably stronger than you."

"That would certainly help." He reached her and together they were able to get the animal the last few feet into the corral.

Romanoff closed the gate and latched it. "Thanks," she said, a little breathless.

"You're welcome." He watched her wipe her hands off. "Don't suppose you're an earth witch?"

She blinked and looked over at him. "No. Fire." She held out a hand and a little flame appeared, danced over her fingers, then snuffed out. "Do you need an earth witch?"

"Yes. I need fields filled and a mystery solved."

"My friend is an earth witch," she told him, hooking a thumb over her shoulder at her house. "And loves a good mystery."

Clint smiled at her. "Are you offering an introduction?"

"I am due to go in for lunch." She hopped off the fence and headed towards the house. "Might even offer you some."

He fell into step beside her. "I am a very polite guest."

"You've helped me out twice now. Least I could do is offer you a meal."

They hopped the fence out of the sheep field into a neat and orderly garden. Most of the plants were seedlings, just starting to pop up. Clint recognized carrots and various lettuces. There was a hearty patch of lavender at the far edge, bustling with honey bees. A few rows down a woman in a simple blue dress was weeding.

Romanoff whistled and the woman looked up. She was a few years older than the other woman, closer to Clint's age probably, with a deep scar on one cheek and dark brown hair tied back in a braid.

"This is the neighbor," Romanoff said with a gesture to Clint.

That got the woman to stand up, peeling her gloves off. "Hello."

"Clint Barton, nice to meet you."

"This is Amanda Newbury," Romanoff said. "She's the earth witch. He needs help with his fields."

They shook hands. Her age was a little hard to guess, but she definitely wasn't old. Maybe the right age to be the daughter, though, if she was a woman who looked young. "My companions also thought you might have something to do with our sudden bounty of oranges."

She smiled a little. "That was me. Natasha said you were mundane, wasn't sure you'd notice. Consider it a housewarming gift. That place has been empty a long time."

"I do live with two wizards. I notice the weird. Totally freaked them out, by the way. Granted, they're dramatic about a lot of things."

"Your friends are wizards?" she asked, head tilting. "I'm sorry, Nat said you were mundane so I just assumed."

"Somedays even I am not sure how I ended up with them. I'm not local, obviously, but they're from around here. Or were. Apparently it's complicated."

Newbury went very still for a moment, then seemed to shake it off. "Well, if you need help with your fields I'm more than happy to stop by and lend my expertise."

"Thank you, we'd really appreciate that."

"Come inside," Romanoff said. "We'll get lunch."

Once they were seated at a sturdy wooden table in the kitchen, she handed out meat pies. A younger blonde woman came in from somewhere, and was introduced to him as Sharon Carter. Which was interesting. "I was told that was the name of the family who originally owned this land."

"My aunt," she explained. "I inherited it when she died. Amanda and Nat were friends of hers. Seemed like she'd want them here, too."

Clint chewed a moment. The food was really good. "Have you always lived here?"

She shook her head. "I came here when I was a teenager, just before the war started."

"Did you fight?" Romanoff asked him, and it sounded like a test.

"I did," he replied. "With a longbow. It's not magic but it still kills pretty well." He held out his arms. "I've been told you can tell I'm an archer by looking at my arms."

The three of them gamely looked at his arms. "Explains how you can move sheep around so easy," Romanoff said, laying light fingers on his forearm.

"Embracing mundane weapons is how we won," Amanda said, sipping tea. "Thank you for your service."

He inclined his head. "Thank you. But I think pretty much everyone fought. Except my friends, who skipped over the war."

Sharon's brow furrowed. "Skipped over?"

Clint nodded. "Turns out Time Magic isn't a myth. I thought it was bullshit until I saw it in action—just in small doses. The two of them, they jumped into the future and got stuck there."

Here. There." He shook his head. "Apparently you can only go forward. He knew your aunt," he added.

She was wide eyed. "Yes, she mentioned. We were just talking-" She cut off sharply as the floor started to rumble with an earthquake, causing the glasses and flatware to rattle.

Romanoff and Sharon both turned to look at their friend in confusion and concern. "Amanda?" Nat said softly.

The earth witch was sitting frozen, staring at Clint. The tea cup in her hand shattered and seemed to snap her out of it. The earth stopped shaking and she stood, rocking her chair back. "Excuse me," she said calmly and strode out of the room.

The other women stared after her. "Should one of us. . .?" Sharon asked.

In the distance there was the sound of a door slamming open. Nat got to her feet. "Yeah, come on." She looked at Clint. "You too. I'm pretty sure she's heading to your place."

"Oh, good," he said. "This is going to be nice and awkward."

"I don't understand why she's so upset," Sharon said as they headed to the front. "That all happened forty years ago, didn't it?"

"One of my friends, forty years ago, had some sort of love affair with a very powerful earth witch who lived nearby. I am going to hazard a guess, based on the reaction, that it was Ms. Newbury's mother."

Sharon looked over at Romanoff. "Forty years? Do you think?"

She shrugged. "Earth witches age weird. She knew Peggy before either of us. She could be that old. I know nothing about her family."

"See?" Clint said. "Awkward."

Chapter 4

Sharon had never seen Amanda angry before. She'd been cool and contained when in battle or working in the medics tents. She'd wept when Peggy had died. Occasionally she was frustrated or annoyed with people. But she had never been so angry she'd made the ground shake.

They followed her all the way to the Rogers' estate. She paused at the orange tree in the front courtyard, placing a hand on the trunk and glancing up at the fruit laden branches. That little pause let them catch up to her as she strode into the house without knocking and yelled, "James!"

There was no response and she flicked her fingers, conjuring a little wayfinding spell. It zipped up the grand staircase and she followed it. Sharon moved to follow her and Nat caught her arm. "Give her a minute. She won't kill him and she won't appreciate the audience."

Another door opened and a blond man came out into the center hall. "What the . . .?" He tipped his head back and watched Amanda march past the second floor railing. "*Amanda?*"

"I'll yell at you later," she said, disappearing into the hallway.

Sharon turned to look at him. "Wait, you know her?"

"Yes. Though I was unaware she was immortal." He stared at the upstairs hall a moment, then turned to her and Nat. "Hi," he said. "Steve Rogers."

They stared at him a moment. She didn't know about Nat, but she had heard stories about Steve Rogers from Peggy. The wizard who had turned her head once upon a time, only to disappear. And now, apparently, he was back. And looking pretty good for almost seventy.

"Sharon Carter," she said, holding out a hand. "This is Natasha Romanoff. We're your neighbors."

"So there is a Carter over there," he said with a fond smile, reaching for her hand. "It's really nice to meet you."

"You too. She spoke highly of you."

He looked down. "Thank you. I know it was a very long time ago for her."

"I don't say this often," Nat commented. "But I'm very confused."

"Me too," Barton said from somewhere behind her.

Steve sighed. "Come on in. Would you like something to drink?"

"Feels almost necessary," Nat replied.

He led them back into a den that was noticeably cleaner than the foyer. Sharon glanced up at the ceiling. "Should we be worried at how quiet it is?" she asked as Rogers started handing out glasses.

"No, that's a good sign," he said. "He's a metal wizard, if she was trying to kill him we'd be dodging flying cutlery and nails heading upstairs to protect him. Not to mention she'd shake the ground."

"Spoken like a man who has seen those two fight?" Nat asked.

"They're very stubborn people."

Barton was passing out glasses of amber liquid. "So she's his original girl from 40 years ago. And she looks the same?"

"Best I could tell," Steve replied.

"That would explain why she was always cagey about her past," Nat said thoughtfully.

Sharon was mentally replaying every conversation she'd ever had with Amanda. "And why her and Peggy were so close. She always said she trained with Peggy, I assumed she meant as a protege, but they must have literally trained with each other."

"They were the same age, when I knew them," Steve said.

"That would make Amanda in her mid sixties." Sharon shook her head and knocked back some of her drink. "This started out as a normal day."

Steve sighed. "I don't even remember what those are like anymore."

"So what the hell happened to you two?" Nat asked. "Amanda said you up and disappeared one day. And Barton said you skipped over the war."

He sank into a chair, and stared at the fire. "My magic is very rare. I had no one with the same to train me. I relied mostly on books and legends. They said I could move through time. They didn't specify I could only move forward, not back. They didn't hint at just how hard it would be to control how far forward I went. I learned both of those the hard way."

Sharon glanced over at Nat and Barton, then perched on a chair beside him. "You jumped forty years in a moment?"

"Yeah. Ended up halfway around the world, too."

Nat made a quiet noise. "Because of the turn of the earth."

Steve nodded and Sharon felt a sharp pang for him. "I'm so sorry," she said softly.

He sighed. "Hey. At least we didn't get dumped in the ocean. . ."

"That would have been awkward," she agreed. "And you did find your way home."

“Yeah. Though. . .it isn’t quite what we’d hoped.”

"I'm guessing Barnes didn't expect that at all," Barton agreed, pointing at the ceiling.

“No. We knew they’d be old women. News that Peggy had been a general and died in the war reached us long before we reached town. Then we learned young women lived at your estate and. . . Bucky just assumed she was dead, too.”

"Mourning a lost love for forty years actually explains a lot about Amanda's personality," Nat mused.

Sharon had to agree with her. Amanda was kind and strong and a loyal friend, but there was always something sad about her. A wall she kept up between herself and everyone else. "I can't imagine living there, looking at this empty place every day." She shook her head. "I wish she'd told us.”

“I can’t believe she stayed,” Clint said. “Why would you?”

Nat was studying the ceiling. "She and Peggy were close. They were probably comfort to each other. She travelled a while, studying with other people. Then the war happened."

"Peggy asked her to take care of me," Sharon said, getting everyone's attention. "The last of the Carters. I'm a political target." She looked over at Nat. "I know she's getting letters about me." The other two liked to protect her from such machinations, but she wasn't stupid or blind. "No one would have taken me seriously alone and after Peggy died I wouldn't have had the energy to argue on that many fronts.”

“Her magic was stronger than mine,” Steve said. “But nobody took her seriously, either.”

Peggy had been a fire witch, like Nat, with the temper to prove it. Sharon had heard all manner of stories of her youth. In the war she'd developed spells that worked like bombs, with flames all but impossible to put out. "She was a force to be reckoned with," Sharon said. "Right up till the end.”

Steve swallowed, and turned to look at the fire again. “She burned my eyebrows off once.”

"Oh my God, that was *you*?”

“Don’t tell me you heard that story?”

She grinned. "It was an integral part of her 'don't take any lip from boys' lecture."

He laughed. "I never pissed her off again, that's for sure."

"Probably wise," she agreed with a nod. "Everyone had a story like that."

He took a swig of his drink. "She was a hell of a lady."

"She was. I'm sorry you missed her."

"I'm sorry she never knew what happened to us. She must have thought I just. . .left."

Peggy had never shared that with her. But, "Amanda speculated you'd gotten trapped in a spell. I imagine they would have talked about it, afterwards. Maybe Peggy assumed the same."

"I suppose you could say she was right. Though I doubt she imagined this."

"No. As far as I know this is pretty unheard of."

The building rumbled. Steve looked upwards at the ceiling. "Oh, there we go."

Nat tipped her head back. "What I wouldn't give to be a fly on that wall."

*

That fucking orange tree.

Didn't matter what Steve said. Bucky had known, the moment he saw it, that Amanda was still alive. He just had no idea what to do about that. She'd be an old woman now.

And from the sounds of it, she was now in his house.

He listened to her footsteps stomp up the stairs and down the hall, bracing himself for the sight of her. He kept telling himself it was better than dead. At least this way they could get a little closure.

Then his door was thrown open and she was in the doorway. But instead of bent and grey, she looked almost exactly as she had the last time he'd seen her, save for the scar that ran the length of her cheek. Her hair was still a rich brown, pulled back in a braid. Her dress was the grey-blue she'd always favored, cut simply and stained with grass.

He stared in astonishment. "Amanda?"

She blew out a breath, hand white knuckled on the door. "Forty. Years."

"I thought you were dead."

"Same to you." She stepped into the room and slammed the door behind her. "For a lot longer than you could *possibly* have thought I was."

He actually took a step back. She could absolutely kill him without a single weapon. "Steve took us forward in time, and then we couldn't get back."

She took a couple slow, deep breaths. "I missed you," she whispered. "So much."

He wanted to bad to touch her, but he was rooted in his spot. His voice caught when he said, "So did I."

"How long have you been here? Now?"

"In the present? About six months. We got dumped on the other side of the world. In this house, a couple weeks."

She nodded, sniffing. That broke his heart a little, Amanda was never a crier. Then she crossed the room to him and threw her arms around him. He could feel himself crumble, burying his face in her neck. She still smelled the same. "Manda."

"James." There were definitely tears in her voice. She held him tighter, pressed against him.

He rocked her slowly. He really thought he'd never see her again. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"I know. I know you didn't mean to. It was just. . . really hard without you."

He wanted to tell her he was sorry again, but how many times could he say that? "You didn't. . . I mean I thought maybe you'd have a family. I didn't want to look too hard because I didn't think I could handle that."

She shook her head. "I couldn't. I threw myself into studying, learning everything I could. I thought - thought maybe I could figure out a way to get you back."

For a moment he just rocked her. "You know, I knew it was you. The minute I saw that tree."

He felt as much as heard her chuckle. "I thought it would be symbolic. New owners, new start. Like a house warming gift. Never occurred to me someone would know what it meant."

"Can we have a new start, too?"

She was quiet a moment. "I think we have to. I'm not who I was forty years ago."

"Can I kiss you?" he whispered.

Leaning back, she nodded furiously, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her as gently as he could. And just like that, all the years fell away. Her fingers sank into his hair and she sighed softly into his mouth. The kiss deepened, far quicker than he'd expected, and he hauled her up against his chest, like he'd never let her go.

Beneath them, the floor rumbled.

He lifted his head and grinned at her. She gave him a little swat, but she was smiling. "You always brought out the earthquake in me."

"Steve's going to be up here in a minute to make sure you didn't kill me."

"Probably. And my friends are going to be demanding questions."

He bent his head to kiss her again. "We have a minute." She made a happy, humming noise in her throat and kissed him back, stroking his hair. He ran his fingers down her neck, finding the thin chain in the same place it had always been. He leaned back and gave it a tug. It lifted out of her collar, revealing the little knot of interwoven metal, too intricate for any forge.

He'd given it to her just weeks before he and Steve had jumped. At the time he'd thought it a prelude to an engagement ring.

"I never took it off," she said quietly.

He touched the knot and smiled. "I'll make you matching earrings."

She laughed a little. "Finally."

Chapter 5

When Amanda finally made her way back downstairs it was all rather anticlimactic. She looked rumpled and red-faced, as if she'd been crying. She told Barton she'd be back in the morning to look at the fields, nodded an acknowledgement to Rogers, then headed out Nat and Sharon at her heels. Nat wasn't sure about Sharon, but she was itching to ask questions. Amanda didn't seem much in the mood for an interrogation, so they left her be.

At dinner she confirmed what Rogers had told them. She'd been in love with Barnes forty years ago, was really in her sixties, she and Peggy had grown up together. Nat was sort of impressed what a tight lid earth witches kept on the aging thing. Amanda assured them she wasn't immortal, but the more one seeped themselves in the energies found in nature, the more they got back from it.

It was rather a relief to go back to the sheep the next day. They, at least, were simple and rarely surprising. The one Barton had helped her corral still hadn't lambed. Amanda was positive she was carrying twins, so it was worth keeping a close eye on her.

At mid-morning she went with Amanda to meet with Barton about the Rogers' land.

"You don't have to come," Amanda said. "I'll behave."

Nat shrugged. "Nothing pressing happening on our land. And maybe I'll learn more exciting secrets."

"We've pretty much run the course."

She supposed the only thing left was an illegitimate child and that almost certainly would have come up before now. "You going to see him again?"

Amanda sighed a little. "He said he wanted us to start over. I'm not sure he knows what he's getting into. But I love him. So, we'll see what happens."

"I imagine you're not the same person he remembers."

"Forty years is a long time."

Barton was waiting in the front courtyard for them. Nat found herself waving when she saw him. She wasn't going to say it to Amanda, but he might have been a small part of her decision to tag along.

He smiled and waved back. She got the sense he wasn't a guy who smiled a lot, but he did at her. Amanda glanced back at her with a vaguely amused expression, then stuck her hand out when they reached him. "Good morning, Mr. Barton."

"Ms. Newbury, Ms. Romanoff. You want something to eat or drink before we head out?"

"No, thank you," Amanda said, as Nat shook her head. "I'm ready to go when you are."

He inclined his head and held out an arm. "After you."

They hiked out to the nearest fields and Amanda did her thing, wandering around and sinking her fingers in the dirt. Nat caught Barton's sleeve when he made a move to follow. "She'll need a little bit to get tuned in. It's better if you give her space."

"Should we go back to the house?"

She glanced back at Amanda who seemed to be arguing with a clump of dirt. "Might be a good idea."

He chuckled, and turned so they could hike back up the house. "How's your sheep?"

"Good. Grumpy. But if I were stuffed with twins I'd be in a mood, too."

"Twins? You can tell that?"

"Amanda can, she's a healer. It's why I segregated the ewe, wanted to keep an eye on her birthing."

"My grandmother used to say twins meant you were blessed."

She arched a brow. "Had she given birth to twins?"

He laughed. "No, not the I know of."

"Then maybe I won't take her word for that."

He took her around to kitchen door, and stopped inside to get some bread. "Us mundanes are superstitious."

"My parents certainly were," she said, trying valiantly to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

He watched her a moment. "So it was like that?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. "Very much. Peggy saved me."

"Bigots are bigots the world over."

"Amen to that." He offered her bread and she took it with another nod. "The people here are nice."

"From what I hear, you all saved the town."

Nat had no idea their exploits in the war had made it into the town gossip. "We did our part."

He made a grumpy face at her. "False modesty is unbecoming."

"It's not modesty. There was a war, we did our parts to win it. There was nothing glamorous or heroic about it."

He shook his head. "You make it sound like you carried supply crates."

"I would have if needed."

He shoved the last piece of bread in his mouth and shoed her deeper into the house. "That's very egalitarian of you."

"I'm adaptable," she told him, following his gestures to a little green parlor. "Where are the time travelers?"

"They went into town. Someone needed. . .something. I don't understand the magical requests, to be honest."

Nat smiled. "We are a weird lot."

"They hired me to help them get home because they didn't know where they were. So this all really just kind of. . .happened to me."

She felt a pang of sympathy for him. "And now they're treating you like the land steward." She glanced out at the garden. "You could go back home. Let them sort themselves."

"This is *way* nicer than home." He held his arms out. "I live in a mansion."

That, at least, she completely understood. "There is something to be said for living the high life. Even if you have to work for it."

"Do you work more than the others?"

She shrugged. "We all do different work. Amanda tends the garden and deals with the other families. Sharon takes stuff to town and does a lot of the spell work. She likes people."

"And you chase the sheep?"

"I chase the sheep," she confirmed. "And help Amanda and glare at the people that need glaring."

He grinned. "I can see how you'd be a dangerous glarer."

"My glare *is* famous. No modesty about that, I assure you."

He propped his feet up on the table in front of him. He really didn't care about Rogers's fancy furniture. "Is there anything you do that makes you smile?"

"My friends make me smile."

As if on some sort of ironic cue, the door open and Amanda strode into the room. "The southern field is ready to plant in," she said in Barton's general direction. "Sow something by the end of the week and I should be able to encourage it to catch up to the season. Tell James he needs to tweak the soil makeup in the eastern patch, it's too harsh right now." Turning to Nat, she added, "We need to go."

Raising her brows at the even-more-brusque-than-usual tone, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"Carriage on the road, heading to our house. It had Pierce's crest on the side."

Nat bit out a curse.

"Trouble?" Clint asked.

"Very much," she said, as Amanda nodded. "We need to get to the house before they do."

"If we cut across the fields-" Amanda suggested and Nat was nodding before she finished.

Clint stood up. "Let me go get my bow."

Nat kind of expected Amanda to try and put him off. But she nodded. "We'll meet you in front."

"How far out is he?" Nat asked.

"He was coming around their east field. Five minutes, pace he was going."

It would be tight, but if they ran they could get back in time. "Sharon's still home?"

"I think so. But she knows not to let him in."

"Doesn't mean she can keep him out."

"Don't underestimate a Carter."

Barton appeared, long bow in hand, it was almost as tall as Nat, and together the three of them started running across the fields.

"Who's Pierce?" Barton asked.

"Head of one of the richer witch families," Amanda answered. "Stayed neutral in the war and managed to scoop up a bunch of land and other assets in the chaos."

Clint squinted into the distance. "Is he laying siege?"

"In the way only nobility can," Nat muttered.

He looked confused, but Amanda said, "He has a son. If I have to wager a guess, I'd say he's going to try to get Sharon to marry him."

"Closed carriage, smart. Open windows, dumb. You want me kill him?"

Nat looked over at Amanda, who was almost visibly wrestling with her conscience. "I know there's a downside, but I'm having trouble finding it."

"The public hanging angle?"

"There it is." They'd reached the fence line and hopped it easily. "We'll let Amanda do it her way." Nat glanced over. "You do have a plan, right?"

"I'm working on one."

"I can get up on the roof and keep an eye on him," Clint said. "I'll only shoot him if I have to."

"I feel like you'd be more effectively threatening sitting in the room with us." Amanda cursed under her breath. "No one mention that Steve and James are back."

"What is he going to do, try and fight them?" Clint asked. "I think that's nearly impossible."

"They didn't get along well forty years ago. He would never have been so bold during the war if they'd been around. I don't want him to know they're back until I know why he's here."

"For today I can just be your servant."

"I really appreciate that." They let themselves in the back door with the carriage still on the road.

"Sharon!" Nat bellowed as Amanda stripped off her gardening apron and waved a hand over them to clean off the mud and grass.

Sharon appeared in the doorway, startled. "What's wrong?"

"We're about to have unpleasant company," Amanda told her. "Put on some tea."

She eyed Clint's bow. "What kind of unpleasant?"

"Pierce," Nat told her. "And probably his son."

Her face twisted in disgust. "The one who leers and talks about nothing but horses and hunting and boxing?"

"That's the one."

"I hear the wheels in the drive," Clint said, finding a spot in the corner to lean menacingly.

Nat flicked fingers to heat up the kettle while Amanda sorted out cups. "I'll answer the door."

Amanda gave her a warning look. "Company manners until he gives us a reason."

She blinked innocently. "I'm the picture of charm and gentility."

"Does that apply to me, too?" Clint asked, and Nat turned to grin at him.

"You're free to glare at him at your leisure," Amanda said. "Just don't shoot him till I ask."

"You can shoot the son all you want."

"Sharon!"

A fist banged on the door heavily.

Nat brushed a hand down her skirt and nodded to Amanda, then headed to the front of the house.

Pulling open the front door revealed Alexander Pierce and his son, who both looked down their noses at her. "Can I help you?" she asked, because no way was this going to be easy for them.

"It's high time I had a conversation with Ms. Newbury."

Right to the point. Nat kind of admired that. "This way." She didn't offer to take their hats or gloves, just turned on a heel and headed towards the back. After a pause, she heard their footsteps behind her.

Amanda and Sharon had managed to set up a proper tea and were sitting there innocently, as if they had no idea anyone was coming. Amanda managed a wide eyed look when they entered. "Mr. Pierce! What a surprise. I wish you'd let me know you were planning a visit, I would have greeted you properly."

"Would you?" he asked, helping himself to a seat.

There was no chair for his son, so he hovered by the wall, the way Clint was. Nat took a spot near him to have the best view.

"Guests usually get a better greeting with notice," Amanda said, a little pointedly. "To what to we owe the honor."

"We have business to settle."

Her brows went up in a way Nat knew meant danger. "I don't believe we do."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a piece of paper, unfolding it and handing it to Amanda. "I have here a contract, one I entered into with Miss Carter's parents."

She took it between thumb and forefinger, as if it was contaminated, then skimmed it. "Was Peggy aware of this?"

"I haven't the faintest. It was between Harrison and I. Supposed to take effect after she turned twenty one. But with the war and subsequent mourning it felt. . . unseemly to enforce it before now."

Nat was pretty sure that meant it was counterfeit and it had taken this long to get it right.

Amanda finished reading it and handed it over to Sharon to read. The window rattled with a gust of wind. Concerned now, Nat leaned over and held out her hand so she could see it. It was a betrothal contract.

"And if Miss Carter doesn't wish to marry your son?" Amanda said, with deadly calm.

Pierce smiled, looking oddly serpentine. "I'm afraid the contract doesn't require her consent."

"Marriage does," Sharon said. "I have to stand up in public and say 'I do'."

"Indeed. But if you do not abide by the terms you will be in breach of contract, which would carry a rather hefty penalty." He glanced pointedly around the room. "A sum I'm certain you don't have on hand."

Amanda stared him down. "I feel compelled to point out that the party who signed that contract is dead."

"But neither he, nor Miss. Carter's guardian changed the terms. So it was still valid when she came of age. I'm afraid there's nothing you can do about that, Ms. Newbury. You're not her mother or her guardian. Just an aging witch clinging to what little political power you have. Which you are about to lose."

The ground under their feet began to rumble. Nat pushed off the wall, feeling heat pool in her hands. And out of the corner of her eye she saw Clint reach for his bow.

Chapter 6

There was no reason for the empty house to set off alarm bells in Steve's head. Barton was often out in the fields and he'd said something about Amanda coming to look at the dirt today. But if that was the case, he and Bucky should have passed them on the road from town and they hadn't.

He'd think it was just him being paranoid, but Bucky was prowling from room to room like he was hunting for something, so clearly he felt it too.

Whatever was going on, pausing it while were looking couldn't hurt. He collected his power, and slowly the world stilled. Hiking upstairs, he found Bucky standing at his door, a scrap of paper in his hand. Touching his shoulder, Steve unfroze him, a trick it had taken him ages to learn.

"We need to go over to Amanda's house," Bucky said when he could talk again.

"What happened?" he asked as he turned to head down the hall.

"I don't know. She left me a message, part of the code we used when we were young and she was sneaking out to meet me." He showed him the paper, which had a little sketch that looked like a thorn branch. "Meant I needed to stay away."

"And so we're doing the opposite?"

"Something bad enough to put both of us on edge and get Amanda the stoic to try to shoo me away? Hell yeah we're running right into that."

"I've got time stopped, so we can investigate without being seen."

"That's a very handy trick of yours."

They went out the back, past their frozen kitchen staff, and hiked across the fields towards the Carter property. They let themselves in the back door, into their smaller kitchen to find an interesting tableau. Amanda and Sharon were seated at the table with an old man. Natasha and Barton stood behind them and his hand was reaching for his bow.

"Well, that's not good," Bucky said.

"Agreed," Steve replied. He reached over to touch Amanda to unfreeze her.

She jerked and he felt a little jolt of her magic. Blinking rapidly, she looked around and saw them, then the rest of them frozen. Blowing out a breath, she said, "I told you to stay away," even as she stood and hugged Bucky.

"You thought he'd listen?" Steve asked her.

"It's been forty years, I forgot he never listens." She looked over at him. "Wake up Sharon, Nat, and Barton. We need to talk."

He woke up Sharon first, and got a gust of wind in the face. Apparently everybody was tense. She blinked rapidly, like Amanda had, then glanced around the room in a panic. "What-"

"He stopped time," Amanda explained. "He does that."

He gave her what he hoped was a disarming smile. "This is my primary magic."

She looked from the old man across the table, then over to a still frozen Nat and Barton. When she looked back at Steve she grinned brightly. "That's amazing."

The grin surprised him. Most people were alarmed, or confused, or wary. Almost universally they never looked at him quite the same again. "Thank you."

He woke up Barton - who'd seen him freeze people before - and then Natasha, who almost burned him when he touched her. She took the frozen time in stride, though she was hard enough to read she might have been quietly freaking out and he'd never know.

"So what's going on here?" Bucky asked once everyone was moving.

"That's Alexander Pierce," Amanda said, pointing at the old man. "He claims to have an old agreement with Sharon's parents requiring she marry his son."

"How well is he frozen?" Nat asked. "Could he wake up?"

"Not unless I do it," Steve replied. He didn't know any more details, but clearly this was the bad guy. "Feel free to hit him."

"I was thinking more hand in a bowl of warm water."

Sharon sighed and looked at Amanda. "What are we going to do?"

She was frowning at Pierce. "I don't know."

Steve picked up the contract and skimmed it, sighing as he reached the bottom. "This looks legitimate."

"I can't believe my father would have done this," Sharon said. "He would have at least told me. Warned me."

"Pierce has the means to make a very good forgery. And as he's the only one alive who was part of it, there's no way to prove otherwise."

"Sadly, I can't go back and check," Steve said.

Nat was reading it now. "Huh."

The rest of them turned to look at her. "Define 'huh,'" Amanda requested.

“I’m pretty damn sure Sharon’s parents didn’t sign this, they weren’t morons. It notes invalidation of the contract entitles Pierce to a significant share of Sharon’s property. Meaning that if you marry pimplehead here, he gets your land. If you don’t. . .he gets your land.”

"I don't know that 'the Carters weren't morons' is sufficient evidence to dispute it." Amanda rubbed her head. "I can bring it before the other families, but given how eager the rest of them are to marry her off. . ." She looked at Sharon. "I don't suppose there's a strapping village boy you might like to elope with?"

“Whomever he is, Pierce may just kill him,” Nat replied.

“What if I don’t own anything?” Sharon asked. “I just sign the deed over to Amanda.”

“That wouldn’t hold up. It would look like we did it to get out of this contract. Which would be true.” Nat sank into a seat. “Random village boy would probably go over about the same.”

"I'm not marrying him," Sharon said, pointing at the gloomy man in the corner. "I'll run away to the woods first."

"The only think Pierce will even remotely respect is if you're betrothed to another wizard," Amanda said. "Someone powerful enough he won't attack them. But I've been holding off all the other families, there's no time to arrange anything."

The words came out of Steve’s mouth on pure impulse. “I’ll do it.”

They all turned to stare at him. Bucky was looking at him like he'd grown a second head. "I'm sorry?" Amanda asked.

Well, now he was committed. Steve Rogers didn’t back down from things. “It would be socially logical and legally bullet proof,” he said. “Our families have long known each other. Our lands border. I proposed for purposes of consolidation.” He looked over at Pierce. “I am a wizard of myth and legend. People are scared of me.”

Sharon looked at Amanda, as if expecting her to make the decision for her. Instead, Amanda shrugged. "You're an adult, it's your choice. Steve's a good man. Honest and loyal to a fault. You could do much worse. And he's right, Pierce will fume, but he's afraid of him, as are most of the families."

The blonde seemed to turn that over in her head, then looked back at Steve. "Why? You barely know me. I think this is our second conversation."

There were a number of complicated reasons, none of which he wanted to explain in front of an audience. “I don’t like bullies.”

She studied his face a moment and he wondered what she saw. Air witches were usually good judges of character. But she was right, she barely knew him.

Finally, she nodded and looked up at Amanda. "Okay, let's do this."

"I'm thinking I go outside, unfreeze time, and then storm in like the outraged lunkhead he probably thinks I am."

"I'm looking forward to watching that," Amanda told him. "Everyone back where you were," she added, slipping back into her seat.

Steve herded Bucky outside. The other man clearly did not want to leave. "Are you sure you don't want to think this through a little more?" he hissed at Steve.

He sighed. "It's logical and you know it."

"Logical, maybe. Still a little crazy."

"She's pretty. She's clearly smart and has some spirit to her. She's got magic, and we're neighbors. I could do a lot worse."

Bucky shook his head, looking unconvinced. "All right. Let's just get it over with."

"Right," he said. "Three, two, one. . ." There was always a strange jolt when time restarted.

The earth shook under their feet and the wind rattled the trees. Figuring that was their cue they strode back into the house to break up the tableau for real.

Pierce got to his feet when the door slammed open. "What is the meaning-" He broke off, face pale. "Rogers."

Pierce and he were around the same age. Only Pierce was old and Steve wasn't. "Saw the carriage. Thought you might be over here coveting my property."

He stared at him another minute, then looked at Amanda. "You knew."

She smiled, showing teeth. "As I said, Alexander. If you'd told me you were coming, we could have arranged a proper welcome."

"This doesn't concern you," he told Steve. "My business is with Miss. Carter."

He cleared his throat. "Right. She's my betrothed, so I think I'm mostly responsible for her at this point. Whatever you want it's better you discuss it with me than Ms. Newbury."

"Your - your betrothed." The note of incredulity was a little insulting. Pierce whirled to Amanda. "You didn't think to mention she was previously spoken for?"

She waved a hand. "Sharon and Rogers haven't made their announcement yet. I was hoping to get you to listen to reason, rather than outing them."

Sharon stood and tucked a hand into Steve's. "You see, Mr. Pierce, I'm not free to marry your son, no matter what contract you might have. I'm terribly sorry you came all this way for nothing."

He put his arm around her. "Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?"

Pierce glared at him and the windows rattled with wind again. Sharon pressed slightly closer into Steve's side and Amanda got to her feet. For a few heartbeats the air was tense.

"No," Pierce finally said. "Not at this time." Gathering up composure he gestured to his son, who hadn't said a damn word this entire time. "We'll be staying at my hunting lodge nearby for a few weeks. Perhaps we'll have a chance to attend the nuptials?"

"I'll be sure to add your name to the invitation list," Amanda said, in a tone more suited to a threat.

They stormed out, slamming the door so hard the house shook.

When the sound of hoofbeats indicated the Pierces had, in fact, left, Amanda sank into her seat again. "Gods I need a drink."

"My cellar is full," Steve said. "You're welcome to come over."

"It's not the worst idea," Nat said.

"Getting drunk?"

She shook her head, then stopped. "Well, maybe. But we do kinda need to plan a wedding."

He rubbed his forehead. "Yeah. Now we have to make a thing of it."

Sharon was still standing next to him and gave his hand a little squeeze. "I'm sorry."

He offered her a smile. She probably felt as unbalanced as he did right now. "We probably should talk, too. Privately."

"That's probably a good idea."

"You two talk," Amanda said. "The rest of us will go over to your place. I need to talk to James and Barton about getting the land ready to plant. When you're ready come over and we can talk." She paused in that way she did when she realized she was taking over a conversation. "If that works for you."

"Fine by me," Steve said. "Thank you."

She gave him a little nod, then looked at Sharon and smiled, reaching out to hug her. "It'll be okay," he heard her whisper.

Sharon nodded and smiled when Amanda let her go. Then the rest of them filed out the door, leaving them alone.

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The walk back to the Rogers estate was quiet and solemn. They'd won, inasmuch as they'd beaten Pierce at his own game. But Amanda imagined Steve and Sharon were now having a

rather awkward conversation. Life was about to change, irrevocably. And there was nothing any of them could do to stop it now.

James walked beside her, and slid his hand into hers. "You all right?"

She nodded, because she didn't know how to explain what was wrong. "That was a very stressful half hour."

"You know he was an asshole 40 years ago, too."

"Oh, I know." She ran her thumb along the side of his finger. She'd always loved his hands. Big and rough and usually as caked in dirt as hers. "I'm glad Sharon's not marrying his awful son. But I feel bad for her and Steve."

"He's very determined," James offered. "I think they'll figure it out."

"I know. And I meant what I said, he's a good man. It's just. . . not ideal." That was probably a tremendous understatement. Not wanting to wallow too far into her thoughts, she looked at him and tried to smile. "So if your surrogate brother marries my surrogate niece does that mean we're related in some way?"

"Only to people who are really pedantic."

When they reached the house she told him what she'd told Barton about the fields and the three of them hiked out so he could fiddle with the soil chemistry. On the way back in they discussed potential crops - every thing from tomatoes to grapes to flowers. When they got back to the house there was still no sign for Steve and Sharon, but Nat had liberated several bottles from the well-stocked basement.

"Rogers has good stuff in his cellar," Nat called, lifting up a bottle.

"He always had good taste," Amanda commented. She tilted her head to read the labels, picking one bottled the year she first met James. Popping the cork, she took a drink, hissing at the burn.

James grinned at her. "We've stolen things from his cellar before."

"We certainly have." She held the bottle out for him to take a drink.

"So are you immortal?" Barton asked her, taking his own bottle.

She shrugged. "Probably not. I could age if I wanted to. It was convenient not to."

"What if you choose not to?" James asked.

"To not age?" She reached out for the bottle again. "Oldest earth witch I've met claimed to be two hundred and twelve. She looked maybe 50."

Nat whistled. "I got the wrong kind of magic."

"It's less fun than you'd imagine." She even managed not to look at James when she said it.

"Everybody thinks their own magic is no fun, and others are better," Nat said.

"I don't think any of it sounds fun," Clint replied.

Nat looked at him in surprise. "Really? None of it?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I like being mundane. Nobody bothers me."

"Magic does complicate our lives," Amanda agreed. Had she been mundane, she'd be an old woman now. But had Steve been mundane maybe she'd have lived that long life with James.

"Maybe," Nat said. "But if I hadn't had magic I'd have been stuck in my little village back in the old country. I'll trade the complications for that."

"All of our lives would be a lot less interesting," James said. She could feel him looking at her.

Nat nudged Clint. "Including yours."

He inclined his head and took another drink. "I will say, I enjoy spectating on all your magical things."

"I imagine we're an entertaining drama." Amanda sat in the heavy leather couch near the window, taking her bottle with her. James hovered a moment, looking uncertain, so she took pity on him and moved over so he could sit as well. "Though there are men like Pierce in mundane society as well."

"Maybe I'd have gotten to shoot him, then."

"Had Steve not come in when he did I was seriously considering it."

"Well, you're going to be sort of family now. If you ever need me to kill anyone for you, just let me know."

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "Same to you."

"Is anybody hungry?" James asked. "I could see what food I can dig up."

Food would probably help the wine from going straight to her head. "I can help you," Amanda said as the others nodded.

He gave her a smile and reached for her hand. "Thank you."

She tucked her hand into his and let him haul her to her feet. Their kitchen was neat and well stocked, clearly they had day help coming in from the village. Steve and James had never been housekeepers.

"What do you think of Steve marrying her?" she asked him as they cobbled together a meal.

He stopped and rubbed his forehead. "I . . . Steve leaps without looking. I can never decide if this is a good thing, or a bad thing."

"I was surprised Sharon agreed," she admitted. "She's not impulsive." Slicing into an apple, she added, "But she's young. I remember being that age. Thinking everything would work out fine, no matter what."

"It might just. He's a good man. He's just got a self-sacrificing streak."

"I remember. Always looking for a sword to throw himself on." She chuckled. "He'd have given you ulcers in the war."

"He thinks he would have saved thousands of lives. I reassure him. . . but he's probably right."

That thought had occurred to her countless times over the years. Still, there was no reason for Steve to carry that. "It is what it is," she said. "Wishing won't change it."

"Legend says Time Wizards can go backwards. Steve can't figure out how, but the stories are out there. Maybe they're just stories, though. No one really understands how his magic works."

"I know that always frustrated him. I asked around, in my wanderings, but never met anyone else with Time magic. Or even one who had known one." She piled her cut fruit onto a tray and looked over at him. "He's unique."

He watched her a moment. "What if he figures it out?"

"How to go back?" Her heart ached at the thought. Forty years with him instead of alone. "I don't know," she admitted.

"It would change the world. Change the war. Feels selfish just thinking about us."

"I know. It's still a gamble. We have no idea how you and Steve would change what happened."

"It feels dangerous. Now that we've come to the future, to change the past."

She crossed over to him and touched his arm. "The legends about going back in time? Usually not the happiest of endings."

"The future's not so bad," he said, putting his hand over hers. "But I'm not the one who had to wait."

"Waiting was hard," she admitted. "But I would not be who I am, without it."

"Do you like her? This you."

Wasn't that a loaded question. "Most of the time."

He pulled her a little closer. "Then I'm glad I know this you."

She touched his cheek, thinking about the first time she saw him, all cocky grin and too-long hair. Something inside her had settled, and she'd known down in the parts of her heart where her magic whispered to her, that he was the only one for her. Forty years and a broken heart later it was still true.

Cupping his face in her hands, she went up on her toes and kissed him. He wrapped his arms around her and they kissed until they lost track of time. He lifted his head to whisper. "You want to come upstairs?"

Feeling a little bit of the mischievous young lover she once was, she nodded. "Absolutely."

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clint cocked his head, listening to the faint echo of footsteps on the stairs. He had better hearing than most people. "I think they went upstairs."

Chuckling, Nat shook her head. "I should have seen that coming."

"Yeah, but I thought they'd at least remember the food."

She heaved herself to her feet. "Well, let's go forage ourselves."

He stood himself, and led her back into the kitchen. He was surprised—and happy—to find a nearly complete meal just sitting on the table. "You'd think they could have waited 5 more minutes."

Popping a piece of cheese in her mouth, Nat said, "She's waited forty years, a woman has limits. Even Amanda, apparently."

"If it were me I wouldn't want an empty stomach for that."

"That might be a good point. I'm sure they'll come down later for sustenance."

He picked up a handful of apple slices. "I can't imagine waiting 40 years for someone. Honestly."

"Neither can I. But Amanda's cut from a different cloth." She gathered up her cheese and brought it to the table, sitting beside him. "I'm not surprised she did."

"Is it a cloth made of stubbornness?" He stole some of her cheese. Technically it was probably more his cheese, since it belonged to his household. But he wasn't going to say that.

"It's the main part," she admitted with a nod.

"What's your cloth made of?"

Her mouth quirked. "Pride and spite."

"In that case, I'd expect you to be meaner."

"Well, I like you. I don't have anything to be spiteful about."

He ate more of her cheese, which she didn't seem to mind. "You just haven't known me long enough."

She smirked and slid a hand over to steal a piece of his apple. "What's your cloth made from?"

"Silence."

She tilted her head, looking thoughtful. "I like that."

"We all have our base elements. I suppose that's where you guys draw your magic from. I'm mundane, so my base elements are mundane, too."

"I don't know any silence witches," she admitted, smiling a little. "But the ability to find that kind of stability is essential for doing magic."

"Stable, I can do. I've been told my patience is inhumanly long."

To his surprise, that made her brows go up. "Well, that has all sorts of potential."

He thought she might be flirting with him, but she was so enigmatic it was hard to tell.

"Patience may be a thread in my cloth, but charm is not."

She waved a hand. "When people talk about charm they usually mean someone who can lie in an effective and pleasing way. I bet people think Pierce is charming before he turns on them. It's overrated. I like honesty."

"That I do fine. Even when rude. If I don't like you."

"But you do like me?" she asked with a smile that was definitely flirtatious.

He smiled back. "Yeah. I do."

"Good." She said it simply, with a warmth to her tone he hadn't heard before. "I like you, too."

"I don't bore you? Being mundane and all."

"God no. Some of the most boring people I know are witches. All they talk about is spells or politics. At least you have interests and hobbies."

"Many of those are arrow-related." He smiled to show he was teasing.

"I know nothing about arrows. You could teach me things."

"It's not that exciting, but I'll try."

She smiled, looking young and sweet, and stole another bite of his apple.

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Sharon listened to the rest of them file out the front door, then turned to Steve. "I know where she keeps her mead. If you think it would make this conversation easier."

Steve chuckled. "It's not the worst idea."

Inclining her head, she lead him to Amanda's office and dug the bottle out of the desk drawer. She took a sip herself, before finding a seat and handing it over to him.

He took a swig that was more than a sip. "I didn't intend to back you into a corner."

"No. I know. It wasn't your doing. I was already in the corner and you offered a way out."

Steve leaned over to rifle through the fireplace tools for a moment, and then stoked the dying fire in the hearth. "Are you all right with it?"

It rather seemed to late to decide she wasn't, but she gave him the courtesy of thinking it over. "I am. You seem nice enough. I don't have any secret love lurking in the wings. I was highly likely to marry for political reasons anyway."

"I am nice," he replied. "And you won't have to. . . we don't have to—well, I mean, we probably should at *some* point, but. . ." She wasn't sure she'd ever seen a man blush before, but there it was.

This probably wasn't going to help. "I'm not a virgin, if you were worried about that. And I . . . liked sex. So I'd like it if it was on the table."

"I just didn't want you to feel like you had to," he said quickly.

"I understand. I want to."

He smiled up at her. He was rather disarming when he smiled like that. "Well, all right, then."

Now that that was out of the way. "I'd like to sign this house and land over to Amanda. We can do it quietly, claim they're tenants or something. But you seem to have plenty of land yourself and this place is as much hers as mine."

"Absolutely. I don't actually want to expand my estate. It's just good bullshit for a greedy man like Pierce."

"And I'd like to keep working. Amanda's been teaching me some healing and I do a lot of little spell work around town."

"Of course. What else would you do, sit around?"

She smiled a little. "Run your household, actually. Most society women don't have occupations."

"My household isn't that complicated." He took another drink from the bottle and held it out to her.

Leaning over, she took it back. "Then I'll be happy to occupy myself otherwise."

They sat there in silence, drinking and staring at the fire. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Eventually he asked, "Do you want children?"

She hadn't given it much thought, having not had immediate plans to marry. But she liked children in general and she was the last of her line. So she said, "I would, yes."

"My whole family is gone. I have the strongest urge to have something that's . . . mine." He looked over at her. "Just thought it was a long way off."

She smiled at him. He really was very sweet. "I would suggest a little time to get used to each other. But it can be sooner rather than later."

"No, I agree. We should know each other before we procreate."

"I think we'll be okay," she said hesitantly. "As long as we talk to each other."

He watched her a moment, the fire casting shadows on his face. He was a really, really good looking man. Her aunt's description hadn't done him justice. "So tell me about you."

The request surprised her a little, though it probably shouldn't have. She tried to think where to start. "Um, I'm twenty-five. My parents died ten years ago and I came to live here with Aunt Peggy. When the war started a few years later she tried to send me away and I laughed. She was mad but clearly proud of me."

"So you fought?"

"I did." She gestured in the general direction of the woods. "I was at the final battle out there, after Peggy died. And I did a little bit of espionage, for lack of a better word. A good tornado to a supply line can really ruin a battalion's morale."

"I bet inconvenient rain is useful, too."

"Rain is harder," she admitted. "But there was a water witch in our group and working together we could whip up a good storm. Amanda claims it helped turn the tide towards the end. An army runs on its stomach and after Peggy died. . . well, we were less inclined to fight clean."

"You fight with the weapons you *have*."

"Yes, exactly." She paused, remembering the first fight after they'd buried Peggy. Cool, calm Amanda had ripped a hole in the earth, sending the first line of the enemy gods knew where.

Shaking off the dark thoughts she searched for something else. "I'm not a good gardener. I'm a decent baker. I read a lot. Embroider."

"Amanda is going to have to come over and keep all our crops from dying. I can't grow anything either."

She laughed. "I'm sure she'll be happy to. The more land the merrier."

He looked down and smiled a little. "Something I've always wondered. . ."

Her brows went up. "Yes?"

"Can you use the wind to. . .fly?"

This was one of those things air witches tended to keep secret. But he was going to be her husband, so she admitted, "Not up high, that can be dangerous. But I can. . . walk on the wind. So my feet don't touch the ground and I go very fast."

He grinned at her. "I would love to see that."

Her whole body seemed to flush at the grin. "I can do that. I can probably bring you along with me."

"Sounds like fun." He smiled. "You've seen my biggest trick."

"And it's a pretty neat one," she told him.

"I can slow time, too. So I can stand there and watch the world move in slow-motion."

"That sounds very appealing." When she'd first come here she'd love nothing so much as finding a quiet spot and laying down to watch the clouds pass by. Doing it in slow motion would have been amazing.

"It's a nice way to make a moment you don't want to end. . .last."

She met his gaze and for a moment he looked a little wistful. "I guess we all have moments like that. Now and then."

"The future's not looking so bad," he said quietly. "Not right now."

"No," she agreed, reaching over to touch his hand. "I think everything will be okay."

He turned his hand over his hers, lacing their fingers together. "Yeah, it will."

Later, she would blame it on mead and emotional upheaval. But the truth was he was handsome and sweet and she was still a little scared at what she'd agreed to. So she leaned forward and kissed him. She felt him freeze, just for a moment, and then he joined in the kiss, hand moving up to cup the side of her face.

It was tender and gentle, a little bit chaste. But there was the promise of heat behind it. And the sense that he definitely knew what he was doing. She let it stretch and lingered a little when they parted.

He brushed his thumb over her lower lip. "That bodes well."

Her face felt hot and her head a little muddled, but she smiled. "Yes, it does."

"Let's get this wedding underway, then, before Pierce makes more trouble."

She nodded. "I'll talk to Amanda and get it organized. I don't need anything fancy."

"If I need to pause time for dress sewing, I can. I've . . . done that before."

"For dress sewing?"

She could see him flush. "Yes. There was a last minute party of some sort, and your aunt and Amanda didn't have anything to wear, so I paused time and we all sewed. Did you know Barnes can sew with a metal needle without having to touch it?"

"I did not. That's hilarious." Their hands were still woven together and she stroked her thumb along his. "I know Amanda can sew. She's the one who taught me to embroider. Together we can make a very pretty dress." In her head, she was already making lists of which merchant she needed to talk to first, how quickly they could arrange this or that.

"Do you need money?" he asked.

"I may by the end of this, but you'd be surprised how much of this town owes one of us a favor. I should be able to get everything I need the old fashioned way."

"You just let me know. Only the finest for my bride to be. It'll piss Pierce off, too."

She laughed and nodded. "I will keep that in mind as a theme."

"Should we go tell the others we've settled this all?"

Nodding, she got to her feet, still holding his hand. "Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

And that's as far as we got.

This is one where we literally weren't sure where to go with it. Clearly Pierce needed to make some trouble, but what and how we didn't know. I think it was especially hard because Olives isn't really into fantasy type things, so it became a lot of work balancing the world building with the actual plotting

If anyone has comments or ideas or things they'd like to see, please post them. Can't promise it will help or that we'll use it, but you never know what will catch our attention.

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