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# Samuel and his Magic

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UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

# Samuel and his Magic

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English, Creative Writing Honors Thesis

**Caitlyn Possehl**

**Defended on April 10, 2013**

**Honors Committee:**

**Stephen Graham Jones, Honors Thesis Advisor, English.**

**Marcia Douglas, English. Susan Hallstead, Spanish.**

The General Store in Lock Haven sold everything it was expected to sell. Milk lined the entire back wall, eggs to the left, cheese to the right. There was a half aisle of cereal boxes. They even sold marshmallow fluff, next to the oyster crackers. Alongside the register sat a soil box with containers for bait that stayed open from March to September, smelling up the whole store. Rock candy on the front window sill would filter the sunlight into an array of colors—which also made the candies sticky to hold.

At the back of the store, between the feminine hygiene products and the juices opened a slim hallway with a stooped ceiling. No one would ever venture through it, unless they knew what waited at the end. A woman named Beatrice sat there. Her hair settled around her shoulders like a shawl, warming all the way down to her elbows. She'd crinkle her eyes when people walked by, asking if they needed assistance. Behind her, a hundred or so drawers filled an entire wall from floor to ceiling. Tight linings in each container mostly tempered all those aromas. But still, the air seemed thick.

"Four shoots of Solomon's Seal," someone said. Beatrice pulled out the second drawer in the third row and plucked out a few leaves. Set onto a scale and clipped until the desired amount, she wrapped the plant in a few layers of cotton cloth and a burlap drawstring pouch.

"Your herb." Beatrice handed over the tied parcel. She did this same thing with the copper resin of Myrrh, with the shock green leaves of Pennyroyal, with all of her drawers.

Beyond Beatrice, a row of buckets lined a retired feed trough. The buckets flashed under the lights much like the rock candy. Amethyst, moonstone, and selenite crystals waited to be chosen and wrapped, prepared and roused.

Books lived in the center of the room, crowding a set of six shelves. There was hardly enough room for them all. They crowded one another, some squeezing out over the edge, others shrinking toward the back. The grimoires sat on the same shelves as books on the Odic Force. A few Bibles snuggled up between copies of the Koran and guidebooks to the Hindu gods. Nordic fairytales rested next to weather almanacs.

The witches also browsed sharp collections of ceremonial daggers. Past those were shelves of deep bowls, candles, and incense. The broom birch twigs and willow straps strung up front, hung from the wall in upturned bushels to keep them dry.

A woman went into labor in front of the bone powders once. It made a mess all over the floor, stuck to peoples' shoes for days. The bigger controversy was her ride to the nearest hospital. Only one of Lock Haven's witches specialized in birthing practices, but she was ancient and easily insulted.

...

"Are you finished with those awful cards yet?" Samuel's mother used a gossip magazine to fan the air in front of her face, her nose wrinkled against the smell. He sat in one of his mother's unforgiving kitchen chairs, a spread of note cards covering the table top.

Notes for his western civilizations history exam sat on one side, a class he'd been forced to despise. The other side had his herbal cards which began to nauseate him with all the scents. Each card had a small piece of greenery taped next to a name, both the household and scientific.

"You're the one that did all this, Helen." Samuel motioned to the leaning mountains of stinking cards. "Wouldn't take so long if I didn't have this history crap, too," he grumbled.

“Don’t call me Helen.” His mom continued to fan.

He ignored her.

His slick entrance into the world had been his initiation into the Wiccan faith. Helen had been a practicing witch for a decade before her pregnancy. He’d never had a problem with it, being the least amount involved as possible. But, during his impressionable teenage years, a respected man in Helen’s coven had decided that Samuel needed a more comprehensive induction to the faith. And practice of magic.

Many of the cards didn’t smell offensive on their own. But the sprigs of all of them combined awfully. His nostrils flared at the spiciness of *Myrica pensylvanica* as he passed it underneath his nose, Bayberry. He flipped the card and placed it in the ‘identifiables’ pile. Anise, *Pimpinella anisum*, was also identifiable, it rang of licorice. Others escaped him. Like Edelweiss, *Leontopodium alpinum*, a white flower with white leaves. The small five-petaled flower of *Crataegus monogyna*, a Hawthorn tree. Or the hairy leaves of *Verbena officinalis*, Vervain.

While his mother bent her head close enough to squint at the oven buttons, Samuel pressed his thumb against the dry end of purple Hyssop. The stalk bled back to green and a new bud crawled out from the shoot. It sprouted up and curled around his knuckle. Helen spun back around and he mashed the growth with the heel of his hand.

His head pulsed from all of the information. Or perhaps it was just the smells. Pushing away from the table, he snagged the saucer of coffee beans he had set out to clear his nose.

“What are you doing?” his mother asked, paddling a rice mixture into a casserole pan with her open hand.

“Getting air,” he told her.

“Prop that door open then, will you?” The door swung open at his kick. “Samuel!” his mother yelled as the door to their back porch banged closed and he settled into a rocking chair.

The Sycamore trees around their house had ghosts living in their branches. No one knew their names or if they were even human. They might have been the ghosts of trees passed, or some of the Pine Martens that drowned in the last flood of the stream. Samuel trapped one, a Marten, in a catch he’d set for rabbits. He thought it was a fox and set its hind leg free. But its foot had broken in two places and it scampered off lamely. It probably died soon thereafter.

Through the screen that served to keep the sun and bugs out, the moon’s clear face glowed. The night’s air snapped against his skin and reddened his ears. Samuel allowed his head to loll back against the chair as it creaked beneath his weight. It was snowing lightly. He thought back to the hours he’d spent next to Beatrice at the store while his mother shopped. Beatrice began keeping a squat stool for him. Her family was part of the Abenaki tribe. So she told great stories. One of his favorite was the Snow-Bringer. A silent eagle whose wings dusted snow where he flew.

These woods and the western wing of the Susquehanna had watched Samuel grow. His mother and her gossipy witches were outside, always outside. With pollen in their hair and dirt underneath their fingernails.

His mind still sagged beneath the weight of all of the information he had ingested. His thoughts couldn’t quite manage the fog of smells and wandered where they pleased. Feudalism peeled of Chicory. The Age of Revolution stunk of Figwort.

The only thing that clanged clearly through his brain was anxiety for the upcoming challenge with Gideon, his guide. Only five years had passed with Gideon as a coven member. Samuel knew his mother's group of Wiccans were hard pressed to accept new members, comfortable with their established politics and their ability to cast with one another. But Gideon was powerful and reverent and slipped easily into the formation, as if he had been there always. The more that Samuel learned about him, the more he suspected that Gideon had finagled a charm on them all.

Samuel had been raised in the coven's circles, burnt himself playing with the wax of sacred candles, peed on a pile of rocks blessed to form the altar circle, puked after he tried to eat Henbane his mother had left on the counter.

He had grown up with the goddess of light and spring as much as he had with the sister of frost and death. An altar they dedicated to seasonal worship was kept in a kitchen cupboard and housed a tribute to the harvest god. The figure he'd fashioned out of corn paste had begun to collect mold. The corn had begun to dry out and the pieces that fell onto the floor crunched under Samuel's shoes.

Three knocks signaled that dinner had been set out. A shuffle of cards and rustle of plastic came from the table. Samuel pinched the bridge of his nose, aware that he would have to re-sort each and every card that his mom had just swept away.

"Excited, Samuel?" Helen had set her magazine aside to push the chicken marsala and rice around her plate. He knew she was asking about his tool quest.

"For what?"

"Your trial this weekend."

“Excitement? That might not be the word I’d choose,” he said, popping a curry-laden bite into his mouth. “Unease, maybe.” Helen set her fork down and propped her elbows on the table, folding her hands under her chin.

“You’re nervous?”

He shrugged.

“That’s okay. It’s a big thing.” His mother smiled at him. “You’ll do just fine.”

They ate the rest of their dinner in silence, the odor of the cards still hovering in the room. With all of his preparation, he still felt ill-equipped. Physically. Mentally. Some tool trials lasted a few hours, others lasted days. He wasn’t sure if Gideon would test the minor arcana spells that they had covered. Or if he’d be forced to assemble an enchantment of his own. He’d never drawn his own circle or had to recall his incantations without aid. Maybe it wouldn’t have anything to do with magic at all.

He would never have admitted it to his mother, but he was most worried about fasting for the seventy-two hours prior to the trial. She would have tutted her tongue at his pettiness. And he would have rolled his eyes.

Samuel’s mother stood from the table and jerked the sink tap on cold. “I can’t help you with history. But I can with your herbs.” She let her plate clank into the sink. “If you’d like.”

As Samuel polished off his final meal before the challenge, he agreed, hiding his smile with the last few guzzles of milk

Three days until Gideon would send him off. The athame, wand, pentacle, and chalice had to be found. Then Samuel would receive his spirit companion upon completion. If he finished.

...

Renata Aldredge braided her hair every day for school. Sometimes she tied a bow at the end. Depending on the day, the braids could be loose, in pairs, pulled over her head. The possibilities seemed endless. Today it was curly, the tuft at the bottom puffing out of the elastic.

Samuel had counted the rungs in her braided ladders each class that they'd had together since freshman year. There was only one option for kids living in Clinton County: Central Mountain High School in Mill Hall, a town over. The second semester of sophomore year they sat through Physics and English 10.

Mr. Mohr droned on about *Wuthering Heights* from the front of the room. Sixteen steps in Renata's braid, Samuel counted. She tied a pink bow at the end of it. And where the end of it dangled, he could barely make out the back strap of her bra.

"Mr. Cornwall?"

Samuel nearly fell out of his chair, his cheeks hot as he straightened his posture. The entire class turned to look. Even her. He cleared his throat.

"What do you make of Catherine's death?" his teacher pressed.

He wasn't entirely sure what he was supposed to make of Catherine's death. He wasn't even sure he remembered her dying. He felt like he was drowning. Choking on words about estates and confusing narrators. And then, being the angel she was, Renata chimed up, commenting on the dual nature of both souls and so on.

He had never loved her more.

...

With a belly hollowed of food remnants, Samuel's feet marched down the frost-bitten grass as he stepped into a clearing. The coven always performed their ceremonies in these breaks between the woods' winter skeletons. Samuel confidently would have said he knew every hungry field in the forest he'd grown up in. But, as he crossed into the circle that Gideon had cast in the center of this clearing, he recognized nothing. No familiar scars on the Elm trees, no sturdily trunked Black Elders.

Gideon sat calmly in the true center of the circle, his legs folded beneath him. Samuel could tell from his raised chin and hands centered on his knees that he meditated. In his sickeningly green coat, Gideon resembled a praying mantis, still and silent. Disturbing the brittle undergrowth with snaps, Samuel's boots ruined that.

The altar table, as usual, was oriented at the northern quarter of the circle. The goddess candle stood to the northwest, the god's candle to the northeast. Both remained unlit. The four elemental bowls were arranged in the cardinal directions. But, unlike usual, they were empty and no tools rested beside them.

Gideon's once jet black hair was now interrupted by many silver strands and hung down to his shoulders. Its typical place, however, was in a tight knot at the nape of his neck. An imposing widow's peak divided his forehead. He did not stand when Samuel approached.

"Are you ready, Sam?" he asked, smiling.

"Ready for this to be over with." The corners of Sam's mouth lifted good-naturedly.

"The rewards of this trial will be your tools." Gideon had brought his hands into a clasp in his lap. "They may know only your skin, only your touch. They will be scarred by

your soul alone.” He touched the center of his sternum and then the center of his forehead, his third eye. Gideon had a habit of being a little melodramatic.

Samuel nodded curtly, swaying between each of his feet. The pack hanging off his shoulder carried one pad of paper, a pen, a compass, a flashlight, an emergency cell phone and a bottle of water. He could hardly focus on his mentor’s words. Instead images of cheddar bacon burgers, Chantilly mashed potatoes, and root beer floats passed through his mind’s eye.

Only one emotion stood above the ache underneath his ribs. Anxiety’s acrid bite sunk into his heart, drawing cold sweat on his brow and quaking in his limbs. Or maybe the shakes were from the fasting. It was hard to know.

“This is part of your mental discipline,” Gideon continued, “a physical challenge compounded by your hunger.”

Samuel’s stomach growled at the word. “I don’t think I like this fold of the magus ladder,” he said.

His teacher laughed and nodded, a wisdom shining from behind his dark eyes. “That’s okay. It’s meant to be a challenge!” He opened his arms up wide, palms skyward, and gestured to the forest which made him look an awful lot like a mantis expecting the rain. And then, with no further ceremony, Gideon told him to begin.

Shaking his head to clear it, Sam withdrew the compass. The young man stalked off in to the forest, his shoulders slightly slumped. Magicking during any part of the trial had been strictly forbidden. He headed due south in the cardinal direction of fire. This late into the autumn the trees had shed all of their leaves, only their emaciated arms waving with the winds. Samuel maneuvered through six inches of snow, unable to lift his eyes from the

ground to keep from stumbling. This focus, however, also allowed a few face-height branches to whack him squarely between the eyes.

Through his wanderings, he disturbed a few paths of Snowshoe Hare tracks. It took a lot of self-control not to set a trap for one. He could almost smell the browning thigh meat over a fire. His stomach clenched.

Samuel's father, Gil, had been a great trapper. He disapproved of guns. Said they made men lazy. But the snares he could set. And the nets he could disguise. It was a type of magic in itself. Using only twine and rotting twigs he could catch half a dozen hares. But with synthetic cord and pressure pedals he could've trapped a small bear. Samuel used to think Gil could catch a dragon if he ever really wanted to.

It couldn't have been further than a couple miles before a spark caught Sam's eye. Grateful for the remaining sun, he spotted the athame, its silver plaited surface flashing in the light. He stopped short of its nest. It lay in the middle of an overgrown coppice of thorned bushes. Naked, without their leaves or berries, they grinned toothily back at him. He knew the end of each barb contained a drop of toxin that would raise welts on his skin.

He dropped his pack to the ground and wagered he stood no farther than ten feet from the gleaming blade. Looking down to the tips of his fingers, he chomped down on his tongue to refrain from murmuring a spell to emit mercurial sparks. He decided to find quartz or iron rock to use as a striker for the blaze and spat into the snow at the taste of blood.

Having removed his gloves, Samuel turned his head away from the sparks. The stones did not work as efficiently as his spells. He gritted his teeth, his forearms beginning to shake from repetitive strokes. Shoving his hands closer to the thorny kindle, multiple

spines pierced the flesh of his hands. He yelped but jerked his hands swiftly enough to produce a flame. Lurching back, he tumbled to the ground, rising to inspect his hands and the flames chewing away at the thicket.

Gil had brought his son into the forest one morning during the wet season. The entire forest seemed to sag under the weight of the rain. Oversaturated branches nearly swept the boggy ground, their leaves continually sweating. Samuel's father cleared the blanket of rotting foliage and fallen nests to form a circle no larger than five feet in diameter. He sat his son in the center of that circle and gave him two rocks the size of his young fists. Samuel had to find kindle. Which, in the wet season, posed a feat as large as catching an escaping rabbit with bare hands. The driest he could find were scraps of bark scraped from a White Mulberry tree. Gil told his son they would not leave until he had lit the pile. They were there well into the night and returned to a very unhappy Helen—although her son had never been so proud.

The smoke of the thorn tangle smelled like barbecue, which smelled like pork, which tasted like heaven. To the hungry boy watching the forest burn, at least. The thicket snuffed out quickly amongst the flames, sizzling to an end in the low tide of snow. Samuel, thrilled by his first victory, rocketed towards the dagger only to recoil in hissing pain. The blade, heated by direct flame, charred a burn across the palm of his hand. Unleashing a string of curses, Samuel wrapped the athame in his wool overcoat and threw it to the ground.

Reaching for his pack, he sifted for the paper and pen. Clicking the pen's end in and out against his chin, Samuel thought the elemental bowls placed on every altar for every ceremony.

The votive candle to the south. Marking the center of the page with Gideon's Circle, he drew the symbol of fire along the southern edge.



The bowl of soil to the north. He drew earth.



The purified water to the west.



And a stick of incense to the remaining corner. He drew air.



...

Following the symbol for air, Samuel traipsed to the east. It didn't take him long to spot the enormous Hornbeam tree that had cleared a six foot radius around itself with its thirsty roots. Strong branches reached for the heavens, its smooth skin blackened in the light of dusk. The upright triangle trimmed by a horizontal line was carved into the eye of the trunk.

He knew up in the tallest fingers of its tallest reach, his wand would be waiting. Aches radiated from his stomach into his legs and neck, his body responding to the chill and his fast. Samuel considered burning the entire thing down, as he had with the thicket. Quickly dismissing it in respect for the olden tree, he also recognized that his wand too would evaporate in the flames. A squirrel scampered over a lower branch. For a fleeting moment he pictured it between two slices of bread.

Sam killed for the first time when he was six years old. They had set thirteen traps before moonrise and returned three hours past dawn to check them. It must have been an

active morning because four had been set off, though only two rabbits remained caught. They both lay flat on their sides, their chests puffing up and down as quick as a hummingbird's. Gil bound their paws and they began to shriek. Samuel did all he could not to wince. His father snapped the first's neck so quickly that his son was surprised by the pop. And then he handed the squirming second to his son. Sam's heart raced, trying to leap from his chest. He could feel the heat of the animal's skin, the fluttering of its pulse. He was told to do it fast so it wouldn't feel pain. Sam could tell it felt pain already.

With its torso secured under his arm and his other hand clenched over its skull, Sam almost attempted the motion a few times. But each time he stopped himself. He could see the expectation in his father's face, which made his eyes sting and his ears burn. Gil was growing more impatient, saying that the animal was suffering from its binds. Samuel thought he might be sick. He closed his eyes, feeling his palms charge with buzzing energy. With a hot slap of it, the neck snapped. Or maybe it wasn't the neck and it was lower down the spine, Samuel couldn't be sure. It happened so swiftly Gil convinced himself he had seen Sam's hand move. He clapped his son on the back and pulled the limp body away by the ears.

The pack and wrapped dagger fell to the ground without much sound. Samuel reached for the lowest branch with an open left hand. Immediately he dropped, waving his hand through the air, as if that might calm the searing anger of the torn burn blisters. Wiping some of the puss onto his pants, he stretched again for the same branch with his healthy hand, cupping the other into a protective paw.

He had yet to touch the art of healing by enchantment. Herbal craft he could handle, although it bored him to tears. But spells meant to heal the body, sew up human skin, were complex enough to devastate even time-tested witches.

A ratty looking Goshawk clipped the back of his head as he ascended. Batting the sore spot with his claw, Sam pressed on. From the crown of the tree, at least fifty feet off the ground, he could see the sun's lingering beams barely arcing over the horizon. Tied to the highest branch's crest with twine, a long velvet-wrapped parcel swayed with the tree.

He and the sun released their hold of the Hornbeam at the same time. Plunged into a yawning darkness that seemed more alive than the light, Samuel laid down at the root base with his prizes beneath his hungry belly. Soothed by memories of his favorite diner's Monte Cristo ham sandwich, complete only with a hot saucer of blackberry jam, he slept for a couple of hours.

The darkness was disorienting to wake to. As most darkness is. He spent precious minutes fishing around for the flashlight in his pack. How easy it would be to unwrap his new wand and conjure a bulb of brightness. His hand closed around the cold metal of the battery powered beam and he clicked it lit. Reaching for the wand, he fumbled with the string holding the velvet covering closed. The pale ash wood glowed even in the artificial light. Hands trembling, he traced the wood from handle to tip. Energy from its core hummed beneath the pads of his fingers.

Tucking the wand back into its sheath, he placed it in his pack with the dagger. The paper had begun to wrinkle. He crossed out the air and fire symbols, arching a line to the watery west, avoiding the altar's Circle.

His progress in the night was illuminated by the moon's beams and her generous reflections off the snow. Halfway through his trek, his heart leadened. He was heading toward Kettle Creek. And he knew where the chalice would be—swimming with the river stones.

The water seemed chattier at night; it tittered against its frozen banks and shadow spirits splashed through at different intervals to the south. Without pause enough to dread the coming dip, Samuel sat to remove his boots and socks. Late autumn ice chapped the lips of the creek. Gingerly, he tapped the surface of the water with his big toe. Every muscle in his body clenched at the cold shock.

Quickly, so he couldn't stop himself, he stepped into the creek; which stood a few inches above his knees and soaked through the fabric it could reach. Samuel dipped his burn beneath the surface, shivering with relief as it numbed.

Five yards farther and due west from the centre of the cast Circle, Samuel's feet found the goblet. Using his toes to curl around the stem he drew it up to the surface. He closed his hand around the belly of the chalice and an icy pulse thrummed up his arm.

Roughly unrolling the pants and pinching out as much water as he could, Samuel regretted wearing the heavy denim. Without needing to check the map, he pulled the compass from a pocket and headed north toward the final tool.

Compasses were fickle things, Gil told his son many times. He didn't trust their quivering needles or spins at the tilt of a hand. Samuel's hands, if he wasn't careful, could send the needles whirling. His dad noticed it only once, snatched the thing from his hands and shook it, grumbling about faulty pole alignment.

When his compass placed him north above the Circle, he pulled the flashlight from the pack. He looked for any disturbances along the ground: a pit, trench, burrow, hole for the pentagram to hide in.

Hours passed, although they didn't register with Samuel as the others had. Dawn's approaching footsteps could be heard throughout the sky.

He knelt in the snow and pinched the bridge of his nose hard. His legs shook beneath him, deplete of energy and tired by the cold. Perhaps he hadn't gone far enough north. Or he had misread the compass. Or the forest was uprooting and rearranging around him. He brought his hands to his face and rested his forehead on the earth.

It was in that position, face first in the frozen mud, Samuel remembered the placement of every pentagram on each altar table he had ever seen, in the very center of the bowls. Fumbling to his feet and swiping his pack off the ground, he set off to the south. Even though his body resisted, he managed a clumsy jog.

The sun had only just grabbed hold of the horizon, hauling itself up to the earth. It warmed the side of Samuel's face. As the trees passed, he greeted them all by name.

"Elm."

"Aspen."

"Green Ash."

"River Birch."

When the wood began to thin slightly, enough for him to notice, Samuel felt tears well in the corners of his eyes. The folded figure of Gideon grew larger as he advanced; and Sam wasn't surprised by the intense urge to strangle him.

“Welcome back.” His guide appeared serene apart from the squint against the rising sun.

“You have it,” Sam gasped, his entire chest heaving from his run, even though there was nothing for his stomach to surrender. Gideon waited patiently for the ward to catch his breath, not even unfolding the hands in his lap. After a few labored moments, “you have the pentagram. You are the center.”

Gideon’s face softened and warmed. He pulled a parcel secured in cheese cloth from a pocket in his sleeve and surrendered it to Samuel. “Well done.”

He stood and together they approached the incomplete altar. Samuel set the dagger, wand, and goblet out. Unrolling the last tool, he placed it in the axis of the circle. The young witch arranged his new wares; and Gideon filled the bowls with soil, water, incense, and a candle, respectively.

“You did it,” Gideon spoke once the altar had been assembled. Samuel bowed his head.

“I did.” He could feel a familiar tension in him, the rising pressure of magic in his solar plexus. The tips of his fingers felt static with charge.

Gideon bent down to raise the cloth that covered the table and skirted the ground. A grey kennel rested beneath the altar, tufts of a blanket poking through the grate. All Samuel could see were three small black nails at the tip of a brown paw.

...

Study Hall was Central Mountain High School’s kind name for detention. Samuel had snoozed his alarm one too many times and skidded in to his European history class ten

minutes late. His teacher had been only too enthusiastic to write him up for it. There was an essay on the Second World War due the coming week anyway, she had told him.

He could have been much angrier. And probably would have been. If it weren't for the braided bun that sat at the front of Study Hall when he entered. His neck flushed. He hadn't shaved the few hairs that had started to grow on his chin that morning. He regretted that almost instantly.

Setting his backpack down quietly enough not to draw her attention, Samuel's thighs burned as he lowered himself into the chair inch by inch. She didn't look up.

He knew he should say something. But nothing seemed to fit the moment. Had she been written up, too? Another tardy detainee? Maybe it was a dress code violation. His heart thumped. He had to squeeze his eyes shut to keep from checking for himself.

They'd spoken a few times before. Hey. Hey? I think you forgot your notebook in class. Oh? Here. Thanks.

But now he had access to her for a full ninety minutes. He felt blessed. And miserable. A greeting surfaced in his throat and then she turned toward him and it got swallowed like a burp.

"Do you know who's proctoring?" she asked. He was close enough to see black flecks of makeup in the corners of her eyes.

"Erm. . ." he gulped, "what?" He wanted to kicked himself.

"The teacher? Who's proctoring today?"

The waddling form of Mrs. Ogburn that struggled through the door saved him from answering. She had swollen eyes and always smelled like Bugles; which made it hard for him to understand the 'Mrs.' part. The chair sighed as she slumped into it and smacked the

attendance sheet on the desk. Samuel lowered his eyes and dipped his chin away from Renata when his name was called. Hers never was.

He filled his chest with a shaking breath, barely daring to look at her.

“Did they forget to call your name?”

Renata didn’t even have time to lift her eyes from her homework before Ogburn grumbled, “No talking. You’re studying.” Her puffy eyes narrowed in his direction.

Oh, to have his courage dashed. Samuel had yet even to touch his backpack’s zipper. With a muted groan he leaned over and pulled a binder from his bag. He straightened to find a torn corner of paper in front of him.

*Just here to study. –R*

He flushed, grinned. Clenching his teeth and reminding himself not to jump into the air, Samuel slid the note off quietly and placed it atop his binder. She wasn’t even in Study Hall because she was in trouble. He closed his eyes against a smile; she really was perfect. Their most recent Physics lab rested on the table in front of her. Flipping through a few tabs, he found his own copy and pulled it out. He caught her flicker of a glance to his page. Her hand tore off another slice of paper and they both peeked up to see if Ogburn had noticed the noise. She hadn’t.

*Do you get these sound velocity formulas?*

He wished he did. The chance to pretend would’ve been enough. But Ogburn the Ogre would’ve had none of that. He could’ve offered to let her use his preprogrammed calculator. Or at least comforted her with a back rub. The images that came to Sam’s mind made him shiver. He accepted he wouldn’t be getting any work done in those ninety minutes. Nevertheless, he dug up a pencil and scribbled a response.

*Working on it.*

She tilted her head and nodded, turning back to the homework. He spent the rest of the time trying to look like he was working on something other than what to say to her once he got the chance.

Ogreburn cleared mucus from her throat after the time had passed and told all of them they were free to leave. Samuel attempted casually to pack at exactly the same rate Renata did so their synchronized exit would seem as incidental as possible. A few steps came between them, which he allowed, just for appearances' sake.

"Renata!" he called. She spun on the ball of her foot, flyaways floating around her face. "Hey."

"What's up, Sam?"

The sound of his name on her tongue would come to him in many dreams from then on.

"Um. Nothing really," he stalled, the black flecks of makeup under her eyes distracting him.

"Cool." She bobbed her head slowly, pursing her lips and checking over her shoulder.

He panicked. "Do you maybe want to get together sometime soon like this week maybe and we can work on those stupid labs they could be easier if we do that you know?" The entire three sentences he had so carefully plotted ran together and sounded like one big mess.

It took Renata some seconds to process the offer.

"Okay." She nodded. "You can come over Thursday—if you want."

He thought he might float right off the floor like a balloon up, up, up, and die of oxygen deprivation amongst the clouds.

Her foot was tapping and she looked over her shoulder again. "I should go, my mom's probably here."

The floor rushed back up toward him and he took a breath. "Oh right, yeah," he said, making a strange gesture between a point and a wave with his hand, "see you around."

Already turned to make her way out, Renata gave a slight wave of her hand in his direction. It was Monday. Only two days to bear.

...

Countless hours in the clearing closest to his house Samuel had spent working on perfecting one of his manipulations. He practiced a spontaneous ball of flame that budded from his palm. It was only the size of a marble and blazed from white to orange to blue. At times, if he broke focus or it created too much internal heat, an arc barely thicker than the wisp of a feather would break free and leap out from the sphere. It mesmerized him.

But the control had taken many attempts to master. The amount of burn ointment he'd used was bound to be noticed by Helen eventually. And his mother hated him practicing magic, especially without Gideon. So, he cut all of the tubes into pieces and divided them between their two garbage pails in the garage. One yellowed murder mystery novel had also fallen casualty, during his very first attempt. He scattered the ashes outside of his window and then moved the sessions outdoors.

His weekly trainings with Gideon happened on Tuesdays. Bouncing on the balls of his feet, Samuel could barely wait to feel the almost unbearable heat before the pea of flame would rise from his palm and begin its rotations. He wasn't supposed to practice real magic

on his own. Only the boring stuff. Memorizing chants, moon patterns, plant classifications, and ritual instructions made Samuel want to pluck out his own eyes. Gideon insisted power lie at the heart of their spirituality. And there it was to be mastered. But Samuel needed to work with the power that built under his breastbone, the one that electrified the nerves in his body and crackled in the tips of his fingers. The one that lived within him.

“Did you bring the athame?” Sometimes Gideon wore his ceremonial robes. When he was trying to make a statement about the significance of some lesson or another. Sam didn’t take the lessons any more seriously when robes were involved. It only made his eye rolls more frequent.

Samuel pulled the dagger from its leather sheath. He twisted his wrist to the right and left, admiring the blade as it flashed in the sun. Fitting, that the folded metal tool aligned itself with the element fire. The palms of his hands began to heat. He lifted his right hand and stretched his fingers out, palm skyward.

“I’ve been working on something.” A single tongue of flame licked up from his hand. “Do you want to see?”

Gideon’s eyebrows pinched together and his eyes darkened. Samuel focused his gaze on the center of his palm and felt the bones in his hands begin to vibrate. The blood in his hand heated and drew beads of sweat on the webbing between fingers. And then the glowing marble began to materialize, spinning and flickering. Letting it collect to a deceptively solid form, he smiled and then let it die.

Gideon stroked his jawbone with the heel of his hand. The muscles in the sides of his face contracted as he clenched his teeth. “You are not to practice unsupervised.”

Samuel took a step back, surprised by the anger.

“You know not to do such things!” Gideon’s fists were tight against his sides but that didn’t keep his forearms and shoulders from quivering.

“I was just—”

“Reckless!” The guide closed the space between them in four steps and reached for the athame in Sam’s hand. Sam let it drop. The handle glinted, its blade buried in the cold earth. “You were being reckless!”

The lesson didn’t last as long as usual that day. They reviewed some of the chants for ceremonies during the new moon phase, channeled energy through the dagger, and went their separate ways much before sundown. Gideon scheduled another lesson for the coming week. And they needed sparrow bones for the casting, which Samuel was to pick up from the general store.

Back at the house, Helen prodded him with questions as to his dark mood for an hour, pushed food on him for another, and then finally resigned herself to stitching up holes eating through the ceremony runners. He appreciated the silence. And took advantage of the opportunity to escape to his room.

The initial shock of Gideon’s scolding wore away and all that remained was a pulsing thorn of anger. It sat in Samuel’s belly, piercing him in moments when his mind wandered or when the energy in his chest and hands began to build. He stewed all night in his bedroom, not conjuring a single spark, with only Merlin for company. Merlin was, of course, the name he’d chosen for his spirit companion. The pup had a dark face and a curled tail that rested high on his butt.

His father had a dog when Samuel was younger. It hunted birds. It didn’t even like Samuel that much, having developed a distaste after the toddler had spent a large amount

of time chewing on its ears. But when his father had left, he'd taken the dog. And then Samuel had missed it.

Merlin stared up at him with watery eyes, a ratty toy sitting half a foot in front of his snout. Samuel didn't feel much like playing. Or much like anything else. So, he sank into his comforter and allowed his thoughts to sway between venomous spells and Renata. Only one more day until their fates finally collided. Goosebumps crawled over his limbs in response. His dreams were shadows that night, shifting and coiling. They smelled like campfire. Merlin slept against his owner's legs, disturbed every once in a while by a fit of Sam's twitches.

...

"Have you done any more work on that Physics lab?" The voice he so often heard in his daydreams startled him and his peanut butter sandwich plunked down on the plate.

"Hey, Renata." The peanut butter felt like glue in his mouth. She laughed at his mumble. He swallowed. "The physics lab?"

She nodded, her two braids bouncing, long and glossy.

He hadn't touched it since their Study Hall together. "I don't know if I'd call it work..."

"Well, me either." She shrugged.

He wasn't sure what to do with his hands, which kept shaking.

"So we'll have to finish it all tomorrow, then?"

Or his mouth, which would say something stupid. Or worse, drool.

"Sam?"

"Oh. Yep. Sorry."

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow, yes. Tomorrow.”

Renata smiled and headed for the exit. Samuel smiled back. And then a rivulet of saliva ran over his lip and he nearly punched himself in the mouth trying to recover.

...

The General Store didn't cater to too many townsfolk on Wednesday afternoons once school let out, for which Samuel was grateful. He wandered through the grocery aisles, pulling a box of Apple Jacks from the shelf. His mother had given him cash for the run, after all.

Beatrice worked the same counter on Wednesday she always worked. She had a romance novel open on the tabletop as she tended to the lack of customers. The stool Samuel had frequented in younger years still resided behind the desk, now supporting boxes of inventory paperwork.

“What are you reading, Bea?” Samuel set his elbows down on her table and flipped the novel to its cover. A woman in a Victorian dress had a muscular half-naked man attached to her neck. Beatrice smacked his hand away.

He didn't move quite quickly enough to avoid the ritual ruffle of his hair. She grinned at him, gathering her rope of hair and tying it behind her shoulders.

“What did Helen send you in for today?”

“It was Gideon.”

“And what does the great and powerful Gideon need?”

Samuel asked after the sparrow bones and disappeared behind the book shelves. He filed past the parchment, the besoms, and the feathers. There were various options for

bones. Selecting one basket after another, he found the dried and packaged bones of birds, mammals, lots of amphibians. They came whole, fractured, coarsely ground, finely ground, powdered. Gideon hadn't specified the condition of the bones.

The powder felt as fine as flour, the ground ones like sand. A few of the fractured ones had poked through their plastic; one particularly vicious end drew a bead of blood from Samuel's pointer finger. He worried that it might give him some sort of disease, felt suddenly much like his mother, and threw the bag back into the basket, wiping his finger on his pants. In the end, he settled on a bag of whole bones and a second of grounds.

He set them on Beatrice's counter, across from the still open book. As she wrapped up the purchases, Samuel grabbed a nickel from the tips jar. It began to heat up as he felt warmth building in his palms. A muted pulse of the energy in his chest built.

"Watch this, Bea."

The nickel bounced around on the palm of his hand before rising a couple inches from the skin and lingering there.

"You've gotten could at those tricks of yours," she told him, leaning down to observe the coin at eye-level. She was the first that noticed little Samuel singeing the leaves of herbs that he'd pinched from the lower drawers.

He nodded, twiddling his fingers to spin the coin. He flinched as she slapped her hand down on his risen one, trapping the coin between their palms. The words of his protest had nearly left his mouth when a dark-featured woman appeared at his side. A rock lodged itself in his throat when he made panicked eye contact with Beatrice.

"Nice seeing you. Tell Helen I say hi." She smiled tightly and handed him the secured bag. "How can I help you, ma'am?"

Samuel didn't stay long enough to hear the reply. His heart hammering, he kept his fist tightened around the nickel. Never before having felt so relieved to see Helen's Subaru, he punched the unlock button and heard the double beep from across the parking lot. The frigid air turned his huffs of air into fog. His beeline for the car distracted him from the patter of footsteps behind him. And it was too late once the leather-gloved hand cupped his shoulder to halt him.

"Excuse me," she said.

Samuel's heart stopped. He slowly turned to face her. Not that he didn't know who it would be, but his throat closed when his eyes confirmed it was the woman from the counter.

"You forgot your receipt." She held out the slip of paper.

Samuel had never asked for a receipt. He extended his hand and accepted the slip, crumpling it as he closed his fist and brought it back to his side. She had fleshy cheeks that squeezed her eyes when she grinned. The expression looked anything but pleasant. The nickel grew hotter with each passing second.

"Oh, how rude of me," she said, thrusting out her hand, "my name is Edie."

Samuel eyed the extension for a few beats before meeting her gaze. He couldn't manage a smile. "I'm Sam—"

"Samuel Cornwall. Helen's son, right?" Edie's cheeks continued to squash her eyes.

"Right." He tucked the receipt into his pocket. In his other hand, a circle of hot flesh started to rise around the edges of the coin. "Well, I should be going." Nodding as politely as he could manage, he rotated back toward the car.

The leather glove came down on his shoulder a second time, a little more earnestly.

“You shouldn’t have to hide that gift of yours, Samuel.”

He spun to face her, his brows pulled together. “Look, I don’t know what you think you saw—”

One of her brows arched high and she pursed her lips. “But, I must be mistaken?”

Samuel closed his mouth with a loud click.

“I know what you are,” she told him.

His hands began to shake. Both from nerves and the now searing pain of the nickel.

“And you shouldn’t have to hide.” Edie raised a hand as if to cup his cheek. Samuel took a small step back. “You should be allowed to practice, to get stronger.”

“I’m sorry. But I should be going.”

“I could help you.” A scrap of paper and pen came from her pocket, she scribbled on them. “When you’re ready to stop hiding.” She held out the number in front of her.

It was a few seconds before Samuel reached up to take it.

A smile unfurled across her face. “Nice meeting you.”

He was already halfway to his mother’s car and didn’t bother to turn or acknowledge the farewell. After peeling away the nickel, the burn on his palm had begun to blister so he kept it in his lap. In his mind’s eye, the black beads of Edie’s eyes followed him the entire way home.

Fifteen minutes passed as Samuel searched the herb cabinet for Witch Hazel extract and chickweed to use on his wound. Pain won out over patience and he banged the case door shut. There were more tubes of drugstore burn cream in the main bathroom cupboard anyway. Sitting down on top of the toilet lid, he dabbed the goop onto the shiny patch of

raw flesh, only allowing himself to wince once. Samuel swore then to master at least an elementary healing spell. Or maybe just one to inhibit pain. Merlin had followed him in and wound eight-patterns around his feet, his favorite toy trapped in his jaws.

The front door opened and closed with little more than a cold draft of air. Samuel could hear two different sets of footsteps. Merlin's ears perked up but he made no move to leave his companion. Sam elbowed the bathroom door open to request some sort of snack from his mother.

"You should have seen it, Helen." Samuel recognized Gideon's voice. "A fully formed flaming orb."

"A fire ball?" his mother pressed.

"Yes, that's what I've been saying," Gideon said. "It rose straight out of his skin, right out of his hand."

Helen only managed a loud sniff. Sam knew that meant tears.

"He broke the rules, Helen. Our rules. We have to keep these boundaries." Samuel could imagine the grave expression on Gideon's face, his forehead creased and eyes shadowed. "All of these years we've spent protecting him, he endangered with his carelessness."

"Careless?" Helen objected, Sam's heart warmed a bit. "I don't think he meant harm."

"It doesn't matter what he meant!" Gideon's voice grew in volume. "We have to be more careful! He has to be careful! This could end in disaster."

"The Astras have always ended in disaster." Helen's voice had softened and her snivels grew. Samuel heard her drop into some seat in the kitchen.

"Oh, Helen." Gideon took some steps and then stopped. "I didn't mean that."

“Too much power.” Her crying punctuated her sentences. “It shouldn’t come to us outside of the ceremonies. Our bodies aren’t meant to hold so much.”

“Come now. He will fair just fine.”

“Fine?” Helen raised her voice. Samuel flinched away from the door. “He could destroy himself with that magic. Like the rest of them. Become nothing more than a fire ball himself! A smoking puff of dust!”

“He’s strong. He’s learning.”

“Or sold to the government as some sort of experiment. Juiced by a crazed geneticist. Trapped by some sick gypsy traveler and forced to be some sort of freak spectacle.” Whatever chair she had chosen was now squeaking as Sam imagined her throwing her arms around.

“Gypsies?” Gideon paused. “Helen, please. You’re being irrational.”

“Disaster!” she snapped. “It’s all disaster.”

“There’s only one a decade, Helen,” Gideon soothed. “He will learn.”

The secrecy and the rules and the lessons and the restrictions and Gideon and Edie. It all came together in a blinding flash of scorching light that left Samuel blinking against the glow of the yellowed bulb in the bathroom. His hand still stung, although the cream had numbed the surface. Within his skin, deep in his chest, Samuel felt anything but numb. The jagged blade of anger that had been planted after Gideon’s scolding emerged again. Samuel had always known he was different. He wasn’t thick in the skull. But he hadn’t realized it was this bad. Merlin pressed himself against the back of Samuel’s calves, wrapping his nose around one side and his tail around the other.

Every muscle in Samuel's body began to vibrate. The previously soothed hand pulsed with fresh pain as energy coursed through him. He punched fingers into his temples, trying to control the very thing that so frightened his mother.

It took another half hour before Gideon left. Samuel waited until he could be sure his mother had seated herself in the living room with one of her novels to creep up to his bedroom. She came up an hour later, assuming he'd been there since school had been out. Merlin refused to leave his side and couldn't even be persuaded to go with Helen with a slice of bologna. Samuel told her he wasn't hungry for dinner. No, he wasn't sick. And yes, he had picked up the sparrow bones. She said he loved him and bid him goodnight.

That night, after completing the essay on WWII strategies, Samuel lay on his back, staring at the pock marks in his ceiling and trying to ignore Merlin's snores. The tingling continued in his fingers, in the points of his shoulders, in the tips of his vertebrae. Lifting his unburned hand, Samuel couldn't keep it from quaking. But he closed his eyes and exhaled, pulling all of the spindling energy in his body into a center.

It rose slowly, spinning. Samuel opened his eyes, not to the ball of light that he expected, but to a cyclone of wind energy hovering above his hand. It gently drew air of the bedroom down into its spout, creating a sort of whirl pool. The fur on top of Merlin's head rustled in the slight churn of air.

Samuel let his eyes droop half-closed and allowed the magic to throb through his body. An Astra. He could be this curse. He could control it. And use it.

...

The milk in his bowl had soaked all the way through the Apple Jacks by the time Samuel took his first bite. The bandage he'd wound around his blistered palm had been

dipped in the cereal twice already. He'd spent an extra ten minutes on his hair and brushed his teeth twice over. Not that either would last until his after school plans with Renata. But he took the time anyway.

Merlin ate the same thing every day. Samuel figured he'd get tired of it eventually, start poking around for turkey bacon or some of his mom's curried chicken. But so far, he seemed satisfied with a scoop of kibbles twice a day. Merlin pawed at the pile as Samuel poured it.

"So, how are those lessons with Gideon going? With your new tools and all." His mother tried to be discreet, unaware that Sam had heard everything the evening before.

"Going just fine." Sam tried to get Merlin to sit with a piece of food. The pup hopped for it, snipping at his hand.

"Getting a hang of all of those ceremony details?"

"Somewhat." He tried with a cereal piece. The pup sat.

"He told me you've been trying new things..."

Samuel straightened up and slammed his spoon onto the counter. "What of it?"

His mother seemed generally surprised at the snap. And she sighed the sigh that only a mother can. "You shouldn't be doing it unsupervised. It's just unsafe, Samuel."

"Unsafe?" He used another piece of cereal and Merlin launched at his face.

"Dangerous, Samuel."

He snatched the spoon off of the corner of the tiles and held it out in front of him. He had to use his non-dominant hand since he wasn't certain his gauze wouldn't get in the way of the energy or light on fire or something, just what his mother needed to see. Narrowing his eyes and letting the energy build in his chest, Sam focused on the spoon for a couple of

moments before it began to wobble and then lifted from his hand. His mother kept her expression measured, acknowledging the act with only a slight dip of the chin. He let it clatter to the floor and Helen winced.

“So dangerous.” Samuel rolled his eyes and Merlin got a pat on the head. Throwing his bag over his shoulder, he said he was ready for school and slammed the front door behind him.

The morning tiff with his mother didn't help Samuel's focus at school. He couldn't be entirely sure, but would've bet he failed his math quiz. That, compounded with the homework assignment in English he'd forgotten amongst all of Gideon's instruction, made the sense of relief he experienced at lunch hour even more poignant. His forehead rested comfortably on the lunchroom table between a chocolate pudding cup and the remnants of a ham sandwich. A pair of purple tennis shoes with dirty laces appeared next to his chair. He took a small gulp before sitting up. The single braid draped over her shoulder reached almost to the middle of her belly.

Exactly a half hour after school let out, Samuel sat on the concrete platform of the flagpole. He stared at the tips of his sneakers, at the stains on the sidewalk, at the dirt beneath his fingernails, anything to keep from accidentally making eye contact with Renata when she approached to meet him there. They walked to her house, only a few blocks away from the school campus. He talked minimally and kept his quaking palms stuffed deep in his pockets.

She set them up with bags of salty snacks and two cans of soda at the kitchen table.

“You're from Lock Haven, aren't you?” she asked.

“Yeah, a little bit of a drive.”

“Not that bad.” She smiled, setting down a bag of popped popcorn. It smelled heavily of butter.

“Worse than yours.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.” He smiled at her.

With the Physics homework spread out in front of them, they began. Samuel had never enjoyed science so much, or any for that matter. He laughed when she laughed and wrote when she wrote and flared his nostrils when he got a whiff of the girl sweat under her cardigan, sweeter and just a bit musky.

The Physics lab took much longer than Samuel thought it might. But not one atom of his being even thought of complaining. She touched his hand only once, when she reached over to poke a formula on his page. He could still feel the spot burning. Not the burning of his magic. More of a tingle.

They both sighed and shrugged, rearranging their homework piles on the desk with only the sounds of rustling of paper between them. Samuel tried with all his might not to slide his eyes up to her. But with the kitchen light against the back of her bare neck, the fuzzy hair there illuminated, he couldn't resist. She caught him only once. He turned his head away, but not before he saw her smile. The light of the fading sun came through the blinds in stripes that fell over her face.

“I should probably get going,” Sam told her. He relished the moment when the crease between her eyebrows appeared and the corners of her lips turned down. He'd never packed his backpack so slowly.

“Thanks for coming, Sam,” she said, “it was nice of you to help me.”

Once he straightened up in his chair she had moved closely enough to him that he could feel the heat radiating off of her. He breathed in her pleasing smell, tea tree and girl sweat. The clench in his stomach didn't stop his entire body from shaking.

She leaned in to him, the salty smell of popcorn still on her breath. He didn't know whether to close his eyes, or lick his lips, or grab her neck to feel the hair there on the back. And then she was against him. Her mouth on his mouth. And it was wet and warm and nothing like what he thought it would be.

Footfalls should have been enough to break them apart. But it took the booming voice to actually separate them.

"Renata? What are you...?" A man that stood only a head taller than Samuel seemed, at that moment, to him to be at least seven feet tall. With Renata's corn colored hair it was no surprise that this was her father. His entire face flamed red.

Samuel's entire body went cold as she flew from him.

"Dad. Dad. Don't be mad." Her hands patted the air in front of her, trying to calm the situation.

"What do you think you're doing, young lady?" he thundered.

Renata's eyes moistened with tears. "Dad," she whimpered. "Dad, *he* kissed *me*."

A needle of ice shot down Sam's spine even though he could feel the fire of energy that his fear sparked in his chest. It took no less than three seconds. Renata's father filled his barrel chest with a gust of furious air and began charging them from across the kitchen.

The adrenaline in his system only intensified the sun beneath his sternum. His fingers felt alight, his coin-blistered palm searing. Without any conscious decision to do so, Samuel felt the buzzing shield of energy manifest a few yards ahead of him. The storming

man passed through it with little more than a blink. Swinging his bag up off the floor, Sam barely managed to duck under the left hook and beeline for the door.

The nerves down the lengths of his arms electrified his muscles, making them quake in a way that Renata did not. He could barely contain the heaving of his chest as the energy rolled through him in shocks. His bones began to feel as if they would crack under the pressure. Unable to stand the agony, Samuel opened the levees at the mouth of his wrists. His palms screamed as the energy burst from them, igniting an entire stream of trees that ran along the asphalt. They crackled and smoldered, their naked bark feeding the flames like gasoline. Running through the frozen air, dusk and sparks and betrayal chased him all to the way to the county line.

Bursting through the front door, Samuel sprawled himself out on the familiar floor, his lungs struggling for oxygen. A set of solid arms beneath his armpits hauled him up. Gideon slid the pack off of his shoulders and threw it aside. Helen stood at the end of the hallway into the kitchen, her fist held up against her mouth and her eyes wide.

“What have you done?” Gideon’s four words were enough to jerk Samuel from his trance.

“I did nothing!” he yelled. A flash of Renata’s dad’s face blipped in his mind. Gideon grabbed Samuel’s wrists and pulled them up.

“I can see the energy wafting off of you!” Gideon pushed his face into the palm of Sam’s hand. “You smell like smoke.”

“You know nothing!” Samuel threw his arms down to his sides, offsetting Gideon’s balance. “I am not ashamed of what I am,” he spat.

Helen flinched. Her son stormed through the house, rushing through the kitchen. Out in the forest he could see the thin runs of smoke rising back from where he came. His legs wanted nothing less than to run for any longer. But he propelled them onward, to his clearing.

The solid forest floor thudded against his feet, the ripples of his footfalls scattering wildlife for a mile. In the center of the circle of proud Sycamores, he fell to the ground and wept. No tears fell. But his nose ran and his chest shook. He knew no one would find him here.

Merlin did. Merlin found him and sat close to his thigh, but Samuel had expected that. The sky had only darkened by a few degrees once he composed himself, sitting back onto his feet and pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. With a few steadying breaths, he leveled his gaze to the ground, laden with decaying leaves and dying mosses. Laying his hands flush with the ground, he came to all fours. Closing his eyes, he drew a breath in through his nostrils, the hairs in his nose freezing at the stream of night air.

Channeling the energy through his arms and into the ground in stuttered bursts, he spurted up clouds of dead foliage as he sent small explosions through his palms. Merlin chased the spouts of soil as they showered. It took another hour or so for Sam to settle into a comfortable seated position without shaking or sparking or hiccupping. The cell phone he extracted from his pocket showed only a couple bars of service. But it was all he needed.

He set the small cellular in front of him, along with a crumpled piece of paper. He hadn't bothered to take from his pocket until now, although he hadn't thrown it away either.

Eddie Shelley's number had soldered itself into his brain by the time he picked up the phone. He dialed it. Deleted it. Redialed it. Hung up. Dialing again, he took a deep breath. It rang less than once before the voice on the other line addressed him by name.

Two days later Renata's father suffered a severe heart attack. It was sudden and awful and Samuel threw up in the school toilet when he heard. He could still feel the magic that had pitched from him. And still sense the moment her dad had passed through it. From crown of the head to the soles of his feet, he felt unsteady. Resting his back against the door of the bathroom stall, he sunk to the floor and cradled his head in his hands.

...

It was another few days after that before he agreed to meet with Eddie when school got out. He'd brought only the athame and the wand. The pentagram stood out as a strong Wiccan symbol, which spoke for his mother, with whom he was not speaking. So it was left behind. And the goblet had yet to serve any acknowledgeable purpose. It too stayed.

He followed the directions she'd given him from the general store to her house. Half a mile north, left, third street, right, second house on the right. Her round face greeted him at the screen door and invited him inside. She offered him a soda, and snacks, and junk food. None of which he wanted. He shifted from one foot to the other, a prickly feeling on the tops of his shoulders. It took a good amount of time before Eddie stopped fluttering around trying to make Samuel comfortable. Which he wasn't.

They ended up in the greenbelt behind the property, surrounded by thickets full enough to keep them from view, or so Eddie said.

"All right, dear." She smiled at him, her fleshy cheeks flushing against the cold. "Let's start with some evaluation."

“Evaluation?”

“Just to see where you’re at?”

“Oh. Right. Okay.” Samuel yanked his gloves off and stuffed them in his pockets, wiggling his fingers against the chill.

Scrubbing his hands, one over the other, he allowed the magic to gather in him, swirling and electric. Holding his semi-healed dominant hand out flat, he summoned the marble of fire that he had mastered for Gideon. In the last few days, he’d been able to let it breathe. The short exposures to oxygen allowed for licks of flame that peeled out like petals. He did the air whirl, too. Edie clapped her gloved hands together mutedly, cooing at the sleights.

“What about with metal things? Like utensils? Oh, Brady used to be able to bounce them around like popcorn on his hand.” She practically hopped up and down on the balls of her feet.

Pausing only briefly at the mention of a Brady, Samuel reached down and took his athame from its sheath. Setting the dagger on his dominant hand he brought it into the air, allowing it to hover. She nearly jumped out of her shoes. Samuel smiled at her surprise. Slowly, he spun it like a spit, its folded metal glinting. He brought it back to his palm and shrugged.

“I can do metal things.”

“And the wand?” Her cheeks must’ve been sore from grinning so wide.

Samuel cased the athame and produced the wand, holding both of his hands up in surrender. “I’m not as good with air.”

She dipped her head and fluttered her hand, signaling for him to continue.

The wand wasn't his strongest suit. The wood didn't channel energy as easily as metal. It was more pliable, but also more delicate. He had to work with the ash wood, not through it. Balancing a ball of light he'd spun a bit above their heads, Samuel murmured a few minor arcana verses, shooting green flashes to the ground where they melted holes into the snow. After a few revolutions around the patch, he summoned the bulb of light closer to the ground to show Edie the fledgling sprouts that had pushed out of the solid soil.

"Oh my, Samuel. This is..." she paused, grabbing his hands and squeezing them tightly in hers. "This is very exciting," she hissed to him.

He could only nod, and turn the name 'Brady' over and over in his head.

...

The funeral for Christen Richard Aldredge happened four days after his heart attack, six days after Samuel kissed Renata. The only Lutheran church in the county held the service. He didn't attend that part. But the family had purchased a plot of land in the cemetery in Lock Haven. It took him less than a half hour to walk there.

The sky paid no kindness to the terrible day. There was no sun, no warmth, not even the dramatic irony of a storm. Dirty-looking clouds hovered close to the earth, holding the cold down. The day was grey and dreary and it cast lifeless light upon the faces of the onlookers.

Samuel had gotten into the habit of casting some sort of magic at the beginning of each day. Whether it was practicing with his fickle wand or using light blooms to play with Merlin or drawing figures in smoke on his mirror. But, the morning of the funeral, he did nothing of the sort. Not one single spark of his restless energy woke when he did. He felt hollow and didn't eat the breakfast he made.

The cemetery held a couple hundred plots. Christen Richard Aldredge's rested near the southern border of the property. A crowd of less than thirty made the trip from the chapel to see his coffin lowered. Renata's hair floated around her shoulders in kinked waves, a black ribbon tied around her head to keep it from her face. He'd never seen it out of braids. At the edge of the property, Samuel's black tennis shoes toed the frozen grass. He couldn't quite make out the expression on Renata's face but her shaking shoulders said enough.

A fog of grief hung in the air. Everyone slouched against it, some with shaking shoulders, others without. Instead of the pressure in his chest, a needle slowly pierced the bottom of his heart. The pain was so sharp, and so precise, he held his breath against it. The bite of the wind couldn't touch the heat in his cheeks. There were a lot of tissues. And Samuel wished he'd thought to bring one. Not to blow his nose, but maybe to hide his face a bit in case Renata were to look his way.

The process took longer than he thought it would. But, then again, he'd never been to a funeral. Especially one he might or might not have been responsible for. The moment when Sam had felt Renata's dad pass through his magic had played in his mind for hours over the last few days. A headache built behind his left eye and Sam squinted against the dull light of the afternoon.

He watched the coffin disappear into the ground and expected more of a reaction from the crowd. But no one fell to their knees, or wailed in sorrow, or lost the content of their stomachs. Samuel thought he might, wiping perspiration from his brow with a trembling hand. Five people stayed to sprinkle dirt into the hole. Renata's face glowed red

against the black of her wool coat and blonde of her mane. He stared at her so intently, as her nose continued to crinkle and relax, he could almost hear her runny sniffs.

And then, she saw him. Across the deadened field, their eyes met with dozens of headstones between them. The red ring around her eyes made the blue in them sharp. Samuel's lips parted and words coated the back of his throat. She couldn't hear him. Wouldn't hear him. And he didn't know what he'd actually say anyway. Her eyes narrowed and a darkness settled over her face. It was enough to make him wonder if she knew what he'd done. Her mother's touch on the shoulder was all it took to turn her away. Samuel released the breath he'd been holding and tasted the acid that rose at the back of his mouth. . . .

The house that Samuel had grown in had never felt as empty as it did the following week. Gideon was blatantly absent. For which Sam felt little remorse. The coven members that would have bustled through around the time of Imbolc never came. Helen darted around corners, left casseroles warming in the oven, assured Merlin's food bag stayed full. Her son hadn't spent more than a moment in her presence in four days. But she was there. He could hear her tipping toes when she'd pause outside his bathroom in the mornings, could almost hear the hand she would place on the knob. He could smell her cherry almond lotion on the recently vacated couch when he came home.

He could tell that his mother had pattered around his room. He also knew precisely what she had looked for, rustling through his drawers and trunk and the shelf in his closet. As if he couldn't tell his own untidiness from others. But he kept the athame and wand on him at all times. And left the goblet and pentagram in the center of his desk, which he'd cleared for that very reason. Those had remained untouched.

The next time he visited Edie, she laid out a circle of stones in the thicket behind her home. They began very small to the north, nothing more than pebbles. With each rock they grew. The final stone, next to the pebble, was a chunk of granite at least four feet wide. Samuel sat upon it and sprawled his legs out. Edie scuffled loudly through the trees from the direction of her back door. She carried two steaming mugs of cider.

“Here, Samuel.” She held it out to him. He thanked her and accepted the cup. “Brady loved a hot drink before practicing.”

Her smile pinched her cheeks in a genuine way. But Sam couldn’t help but turn away from the expression and shift in posture. After a few blows across the lip of the cup, he slurped the sweet liquid down in three gulps.

Edie had him stand in the center of the circle. And asked that he keep his wand and athame in his pack. His breath began to show in the air and he tugged his gloves off with his teeth. Rolling his hands one over the other, he encouraged warmth into them. Hot pressure began building in his chest and he ran it through his arms, using it to chase the cold out of his blood and bones.

“Just start by lifting each off the ground,” Edie told him, standing outside the circle.

The pebble flew from the ground, surprising Samuel into letting it out of his reach. It landed inside the circle and bounced twice before resting.

“Don’t be careless, Samuel! If that had been the boulder you’d be crushed.” Her shrill voice irked him. “And no one likes a human pancake.”

He cringed, his upper lip curling. Moving on to the next he controlled the energy with focus, instead of tossing it up to momentum. A bead of sweat broke on his brow as he

moved up in weight, the heavier pieces clinging tightly and more tightly to the earth beneath them.

Between every few Edie would chirp a critique or side comment. She mentioned the Brady twice. Each time, the rocks fell from Sam's grasp, thumping onto the ground.

"Someone is easily distracted today." Edie clucked her tongue.

He turned his back to her so he could manage a dramatic eye roll. "Maybe if you would stop talking for five minutes."

"This is no time for attitude, Samuel. Brady," she paused, wagging a finger at him, "knew not to sass."

He didn't know who Brady was. Or if she'd made him up. But Sam was certain that he wouldn't have liked him.

Clenching his teeth as tightly as he could, he felt the muscles in his jaw flex with the tension. Using that frustration to more accurately channel the energy through his limbs, he lifted the third largest stone. It rose with ease, hovering just above Samuel's head height. Gracefully, he drifted it around the circle. He stepped carefully around himself, hoping his laces wouldn't get caught beneath the balls of his feet. Although, if the stone did happen to fall and cause some kind of damage, Samuel wasn't sure he'd be very remorseful if it were to fall on Edie. Nothing serious. Just on her leg, or something of that sort. He smiled at the conjured image.

"The last one need only be lifted, Samuel," Edie cooed, her eyebrows drawing together as she focused on the boulder. "Be cautious."

He'd already tired of her misgivings and it wasn't even dark yet. Allowing a droning buzz to fill his ears, he centered his gaze on the mass of granite. The tension in his arms

activated each of his muscles, vibrating fiercely in the joints of his elbows and shoulders. Capturing the rock in his energy field, he began to urge it upward. His nostrils flared against the effort as his muscles and mind burned. Samuel began to see the stone for what it was, not any larger than his first pebble. Just many of those, crowded in on one another. The weight of the boulder dissipated little by little and he allowed his mind to imagine the dispersion of its pebbles. And then, Edie gasped.

The hulk of stone broke apart into thousands of shards which hovered like stars around each other, orbiting the stone heart from which they came. Samuel felt his entire body vibrate at matching pitch, perpetuating the energy that sang from his fingers. A twitch in his arm caught him off guard and his concentration broke. The rock splinters collapsed back into each other and crashed to the ground. Edie's hands flew to cover her ears while Sam only flinched.

Resting his hands on his knees, he sucked air into his lungs. His entire body drained not only of his magic, but also of any energy that had been there prior. The very sinew in his limbs wilted from the bones. He felt like he might sleep for days.

"I think I want to go home now," he said.

Edie fluttered around him as he gathered his bag. She clapped and preened at his hair and tweeted in his ear. He batted her away, a sudden and severe headache brewing behind his forehead.

...

The stapled papers felt heavy in his backpack. Even though he knew they weighed no more than all of the rest. He had barely shut the door when he noticed his mother sitting on the bottom step of the stairs, her chin in her hands.

“You failed your history test,” she said. There wasn’t even the implication of a question mark.

Samuel’s eyes found a very interesting whorl in the wood floor to stare at. He cleared his throat and used one of his feet to itch the other. A sigh came from the staircase.

“I know you’re not telling me something, Samuel.” She ran her hands through her hair, pulling it snug so that it stretched her expression for a second. “I want to give you your space.”

“Seriously? Space isn’t calling my school.” Sam lifted his eyes so he could glare at his mother. “Hell, I’m a sophomore in highschool. In case you haven’t realized.”

“They called me, Samuel.”

“They called you? Why would they call you? What do they care?” He tried to keep his tone of voice from rising. But failed.

“You don’t usually get grades like that, sweetheart. And they wanted to know if anything was going on here at home.”

The pet name made him roll his eyes. The tenderness in her voice only made him angrier. “Yeah? Did you tell them?” he snapped, “did you tell them your little witchy son is conjuring up spells and lighting things on fire and freaking everybody out?”

“Samuel, please.”

“Over this.”

“I want to have a conversation about this.”

“I don’t.” He trudged toward the stairs and motioned for her to move. “Excuse me.”

Helen Cornwall put her hands on her knees and leaned to the right to allow her son past. He climbed to his bedroom, closing his door without glancing back. A few hours later,

Merlin scratched at the door and ended up sleeping on the floor mat after he got kicked off the end of the bed.

...

It was impossible to sit behind Renata any longer. In the seat next to the window in the last row of chairs, he sat as far from her as he could manage for their two classes together. His entire body hurt each time her braided hair swung over her shoulder at the flick of a hand, each time she coughed against the winter air, each time rested her cheek in her hand and stared at nothing. He hurt a lot. And mourned his former seating arrangement.

The test he had failed in history of western civilizations served as a single mark on a long list of sub-par assignments from the last month. Samuel couldn't bear to read a single page of the archaic novels assigned, he couldn't prove any more geometric theorems, couldn't memorize momentum formulas. His entire body always seemed either saturated with magic or drained of everything entirely. Channeling the energetic states toward his manifestations, school work rarely got started outside of his zombie moods. And those were never very productive.

A few teachers had asked him to stay after class. One even offered evening tutoring hours. He'd been given second drafts on essays and extra credit assignments alongside midterms. Most went disregarded, fewer attempted, none completed. The energy became a capricious viper, coiled at the bottom of his spine. It sang with vigor and venom or retreated into absolute hibernation. He still had yet to control it entirely.

But Edie had assured him—the time would come. He hadn't seen or heard from Gideon since the day of the Aldredge disaster.

...

Seated on the hardened ground behind Edie's house, Samuel rested his chin in his palm and drew lazy circles in the air with his wand. His binder of minor arcana spells, splayed open to the botany pages, rested in front of him. He was supposed to be conjuring the shoot of a poppy flower. An orange one, Edie had said, she loved the orange ones.

So far, the only sprout he had urged a petal out of had been purple. He'd twitched his wand away and watched it wither. An hour and a half into the lesson, he felt less and less like bothering with the petals of any more flowers. He whisked his wand in circles, watched a spark of energy crawl down the bough of pale ash wood. At the tip it spun and flashed as Samuel continued to whirl his wrist. With a flick, the spirals of the sparks wound into the shape of a tiny dragon whose tail leashed it to the wand. It opened its mouth to roar and made no noise. But a small cough of sparks showered from its glowing teeth. The creature dissolved in a snap when Sam heard the frost crunching behind him.

Edie clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, shaking her head. "You should be working with those spells. No time for horse play."

Leaning back onto the ground, he threw an arm over his face.

"Don't be childish. You need practice." She huffed and patted the sides of her bun-secured hair. "Brady knew when to focus."

Samuel let out a long sigh, hissing it into the air above him. He drew his arm back to his side. "Edie?"

She hummed a response.

"Who's Brady?"

It seemed the sky had darkened almost an entire shade before she answered. “He was my son.” She drew a deep breath. “He was like you.”

*Was. Was.* The lazy syllable swam in his mind.

“How old was he?” Samuel spoke very slowly.

Eddie shifted in her shoes, letting her head fall back to look to the heavens. “He’d have been twenty-seven this year.”

Sam’s eyes stared into the sky but didn’t see. His diaphragm had given him hiccups. He didn’t feel much like asking any more questions. He probably should’ve gone straight home that after he’d left. But, he didn’t.

When he did finally slip back inside, his house was dark, as was the sky. The fire that had been burning for Imbolc the last few days thickened the air. It made him cough. Merlin waited patiently by the front door and raced circles around him in greeting. Sam bent to catch him in a hug, breathing the smell of dirt and fur in, and then padded to the kitchen. His mom had alternated between frankincense and cinnamon incense sticks all day long. The smell burned the back of his throat slightly.

Only upon opening the door of the fridge, bathing the room in milky light did he see the figure folded in one of the kitchen chairs. He nearly jumped onto the vegetable shelf.

“Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been?” Helen asked, the anxiety hanging in shadows from her lower lids.

Sam turned back to the fridge and set the milk jug on the counter. Reaching for the pantry door, he fished for his favorite cereal and made himself a bowl of it.

“You’ve been at Edie Shelley’s.”

He chomped on a mouthful, spilling some of the milk down his sweater. Focusing on the floating pieces in his bowl, he dropped one to the dog.

“Look at me, damn it!” Helen slammed an open palm on the kitchen table.

The sound caused Samuel to jerk back, sloshing his dinner down his front. He didn’t acknowledge it. His mother’s eyes blazed.

“Where were you?” she yelled loud enough to spook Merlin.

“You already—”

“Samuel,” she cut him off. “Where were you?”

“I was at Edie’s.”

Helen stood suddenly, her chair shooting back across the floor. Bracing both of her hands against the island counter, she buckled her elbows and let her head hang. Sam finally set his bowl down, his hands trembling slightly. Merlin had retreated from the kitchen at the screech of the chair.

Samuel raked his bottom lip with his teeth over and over. He leaned his weight from one leg to the other, staring at the seams in the tiles.

“So, you’re going to trust Edie Shelley over Gideon, Sam?” she paused, pulling at some of the hair hanging in front of her face, “over your own mother?”

“*She*,” Samuel pointed, “doesn’t think I’m dangerous.”

“Oh, she doesn’t?” Helen folded her hands together and narrowed her eyes at her son.

“She trusts me.” Samuel poked himself in the chest.

“Trusts you,” Helen chewed over her next few words. “Has she bothered to tell you about Brady Shelley, then?”

He scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Of course, she has."

"Did Edie tell you he was an astra?" She wasn't really asking. "Did she tell you he was like you, Samuel?"

"Yeah." He crossed his arms. "She did."

"So you know that he's gone then?"

It took him a moment. But, he nodded.

"Do you know how rare it is for two successive astras to be born in the same country? Let alone within ten miles of each other?"

He stayed quiet.

"It's something with these coordinates, the longitudinal and latitudinal global position of this forsaken place." She flitted her hands around head. "It's aligned with the celestial energy of the astral plane for the last decade or so."

"She told me he was like me," Samuel said quietly.

"You're not like Brady, Samuel." Helen trapped her top lip between her teeth and let out a long breath. She waited for her son to look up at her. "You—are much stronger."

They sat for a while in silence, the heat of the fire and spice of cinnamon warming the air. Eventually Merlin returned, still too nervous to get close enough to touch either of them. He plopped himself down a few feet away, coiling up to sleep. Sam reached for the roll of paper towels by the sink, flicking off the few cereal pieces on his sweater and dabbing at the wet spot of milk.

"Since she's told you so much," his mother said, "why don't you tell me how Brady died?"

He looked down to his hands and kept dabbing at the spot.

“Edie didn’t care to divulge that much now, did she?” Helen didn’t wait for an answer. She reached her arms wide and they clapped them in on each other. “His magic swallowed him whole.”

A three-hundred pound anchor caught Samuel’s heart on its descent and he lost his breath.

“Brady didn’t agree with his guide’s philosophies. He grew restless and ornery. Edie used to come to coven preparation meetings in tears. He’d scream terrible things at her, knowing he was ready, knowing he was capable of mastering his own power. ‘It’s mine!’ he would shout at her, ‘I can do with it what I please.’ He stopped going to school, refused to work with his guide. And he’d disappear for a couple days at a time, resurfacing hungry and dirty. We were all waiting for Edie to have some sort of mental breakdown or something.

“And then it all stopped. He stopped yelling and showed up for dinner each night. His grades improved, not much, but enough. He still didn’t meet with his guide. But, Edie was happy to have some shadow of her son back. Until she started noticing his long pants and sweaters in the summer. She began to see the single patterns that peeked out from the wrists of his clothes, the healing heat blisters on the back of his neck.”

Helen paused, and Samuel could feel her eyes on his face. She waited, and he resisted voicing the connection she knew he had made. He swallowed a hard knot in his throat and offered, “Brady was casting on his own.”

“He was.” She nodded, her shoulders sloping into each other. “Powerful stuff. Big spells. Major arcane work from ancient times. He pulled them from old Slavic legends, grimoires from the orient, faded Aramaic texts.”

The magnitude of such magic sent the snake into an icy slide down Samuel's spine. He shivered.

Helen's voice got very soft and she wrapped her arms around her belly, letting her eyes drop to the floor. "He was manifesting some sort of celestial electricity in the forest one afternoon." A tear rolled from her eye. "And he lost control of the magic. Became nothing more than a fissure in the terrestrial plane." Her shoulders shook, and her son knew, in the stuffy kitchen air, that it wasn't against a chill.

"It consumed him," Samuel finished. He could hear his heart beat in his ears.

It took a few moments for her to be able to speak again. "Now do you see? Do you see why I worry? I don't fear you, Samuel. I don't think you are dangerous." She sniffed. "But your power is. It's a threat to its own host. Your own body isn't built to carry so much."

"I want to carry it. I want to control it," he said.

"Gideon doesn't think you are dangerous."

Samuel turned his head away at the name.

"He worries about your strength, your training."

A flare of anger licked in his chest. "I am strong."

"Samuel," she drew in a lungful of air, "who do you think acted as Brady's guide?"

Helen looked at her son.

Taking deep breaths he steadied himself on his feet, clenching his fists at his sides. He refused to make eye contact with her. A cold wave of understanding settled over him like fog, raising goosebumps on his flesh.

His eyes trained on a random spot on the wall. His chest rose and fell like the pistons of an engine.

Helen waited until her son let his eyes lock with hers. Brimming over with salt water and red from stress, they pleaded with him. "It was Gideon."

...

Helen had dived toward the usual hook for the keys before realizing they were still in his pocket. He'd flown out of the house at the name of his mentor, crashing through the front door and cursing over his mother's cries. Midnight hadn't quite hit by the time Samuel popped his mother's car over the curb in front of Edie's house.

His fist hammered against the front door. He let the metal screen slam shut and kicked at its frame. Edie's frantic face appeared behind the partition, her hair tangled like a nest around her face. Darting around Samuel and out into the yard, her eyes appeared frenzied and bloodshot.

"Samuel," she gasped, "what is it? What's wrong?"

The swarm of energy in his chest buzzed like a storm of locusts. Clenching and unclenching his fists, Samuel could feel rivulets of energy crawling through him like fire ants. Edie pushed the screen door open and ushered him inside. She asked him to sit, offered him tea, told him to breathe. He did no such things, stomping the carpet down with a furious pace from one side of the living room to the other.

"You didn't tell me," he began, running his hands through his hair and yanked it until it stood on end, "anything. You didn't tell me anything."

"Samuel, darling. Please sit down."

He pointed to her. "You lied." His eyes were alight and wild. "You lied to me."

"You're not making any sense. Please, sit," she told him. "Please, please sit."

Maintaining as much distance between himself and her, he sat down on the edge of an ottoman. He continued to rock back and forth, folding a fist and holding it against his mouth.

“Samuel?” she cooed, trying to draw his attention to her. “Sam?”

Shaking his head, he placed his elbows on his knees. He used a clammy palm to wipe sweat from his brow. “Why didn’t tell me about Brady?”

Eddie shifted in her seat, brushing the cushion around her free of invisible crumbs. “I did tell you.”

“Stop! Lying!”

His tone of voice startled her and she jerked back. Blinking, blinking, she tried to clear her eyes. Looking down, she said, “I answered your questions, Samuel. I never lied.”

He chuckled darkly and put his face in his hands. “You are a liar.”

Eddie cleared her throat and feigned some sort of cough. “I didn’t tell you everything because I didn’t think you needed to know,” she offered.

“You didn’t think I needed to know that your son snuffed himself out of existence?” he challenged, his voice rising with his blood pressure. “You didn’t think I needed to know he destroyed himself—” Eddie flinched, “using the same magic that I am?” He was shouting.

Small whimpers chirped out of her chest. Samuel probably should’ve felt some sort of pity or compassion or something. But he didn’t. It took some time before her cries quieted and one long snivel before she spoke again. Her eyes met his and she moved her arms as if to reach out to them.

“Samuel, you deserve to be proud of what you are,” she soothed, still snuffling slightly. “Your power is beautiful. You are special.”

“That’s not even what we’re talking about.”

“It is. It is what we’re talking about,” she insisted, gesturing with pinched hands.

“Brady was made to feel ashamed of what he was. He hid! He ran from those who told him he was treacherous, in order to practice on his own. Without guidance, he overestimated his own capacity.” She took the opportunity to move across the room to Samuel and sit on the adjacent chair. Pulling one of his hands into her own she squeezed it. “I want to help you, Samuel. I want to keep you safe. I want to love you.”

Samuel retracted his hand as she dissolved into sobs. He wiped the sweat from her hand off on his pants and shoved away from his seat. His head swirled with memories that weren’t his own and he couldn’t hear his own breath over the noise in his head. Bursting out of the front door, he could feel the scorched heat radiating out of his palms still he felt surprise when the screen door smarted against his touch.

Sliding into the front seat of the car, he didn’t pause to cool his hands before latching onto the steering wheel. The leather shriveled and cracked beneath his grip. He didn’t stop. He drove and drove until the centerline markers disappeared and asphalt turned to dirt. The trees grew and swayed around him, their shadows dancing through the moon’s light. Samuel could hear the spirits that moved in them, skipping between the branches and fluttering through his head lights. He didn’t have anywhere to go. Or any idea where he was going. But while his thoughts continued to run, so did the car.

He ran from Edie Shelley. He ran from his mother. And he ran from himself.

...

The first few times that Samuel attempted to relocate from his seat at the back corner of the classroom, Renata would rise from her own. The very first time she actually

left class. Everyone wished to glance after her, their hands finding itches to scratch and hairs to twirl on the door-facing sides of their faces. But comments remained unsung, spinning in the room like mobiles above their heads. A needling sensation pressed against the back of Samuel's eyes. He returned to his corner seat and turned his face to the window for the rest of class.

The later adjustments didn't warrant such a grand response. Renata would only stand from her own chair and move to one closer to the front of the room. That rigid waltz they performed clouded his mind for entire periods. He could hardly read the words on the whiteboard let alone copy them into something legible in his notebook. Sometimes, if he turned his head at just the right moment as she rose, he could smell her, tea tree and all.

Her braids were tighter since her father died, in a way that pulled her forehead taut and her eyebrows high. Wisps of hair no longer fell on her face; there were no more ribbons and no more bows. Teachers and students and her old friends and her 'what a terrible thing to happen to such a nice girl' friends were surprised that she didn't skip any days of school through it all. She ducked out of a few, ate most lunches away from the cafeteria, always had balled up tissues in her pant pockets and her backpack's pockets and sometimes in her sweater pockets too. A few were found on the floor of the halls, one in front of the restroom, one in front of a row of lockers, one where she'd shed her winter coat for class. Samuel had found one. He probably should've just thrown it away. But he figured voodoo couldn't be all bad and that he still might be able to do something good with it.

The day Samuel moved seats, and Renata did not, he almost lost his breath. He didn't believe it, he checked and re-checked so many times that his neck felt sore the rest of the day. Considering the ache that kept him from focusing in class since her rebuffs had begun,

on the day of tolerance he should have taken the best notes he had in days. But his notebook remained as reliably useless as before. She also ate lunch in the presence of others that day. It was a salami sandwich that must have had mustard, since Sam noticed a yellow blot on her shirt later that day. Renata didn't seem to notice him, or the stain.

...

Samuel was never one of those kids that got sore shoulders from his backpack. It rarely contained enough books to thud against the floor when he flung it down at the end of the day. But he'd recently rediscovered his library card. In the bottom drawer of his desk, with the gummy residue of something once sticky on its front, it waited to be remembered. Unsure of whether or not the library was still alive and well, or if they still accepted these forgotten cards, he'd spent an entire Saturday there.

The county library wasn't like many other libraries. But that's due to their unusual clientele; not every public book haven caters to a large population of witches. That abnormality benefitted him in the extent of the occultism section. They weren't the prettiest books in the building, many of them wilted from humidity and cold and age. But one by one, Samuel began pulling spell books, herbology guides, astrological charts, and arcane philosophy from the shelves. Each time he chose one, it took an extra ten minutes to realign its neighbors.

He had a lot of time after school since he had stopped going to Edie's and still tried to stay away from home until after the sun set. He'd discovered that it took forty minutes to walk from the front doors of the school to the front door of the general store. And Beatrice was always there. Sometimes he wandered, other times he took up his old place on the stool beside hers. Between his new books and the old stool, his afternoons settled.

Although his knees now knocked together at a sharp angle and it kept him in more of a crouch than anything else. But he would read or bother Bea with questions about the herbs or just bother her to be a bother.

Helen treated Samuel very carefully, occasionally bringing him in for a hug when he returned home. It seemed to be for the contact just as much as it was to press her nose into the shoulder of his pullovers and breathe in the scent of the store. She fussed much less and smiled much more once she began to notice the smells.

Running his fingers down the smooth bristles of an Albatross feather, Samuel zoned out Bea's lecture on cauldron cleaning with a reference book of gods and goddesses.

The customer finally made their way out and Bea turned to him. "Don't prick yourself with that, it probably has diseases on it."

Just then, his pointer had found the tip of the spine. He made a quick hiss and sucked away the bead of blood from his finger.

She sighed at him. "Probably one of Pamola's feathers too," she said, bending down to reach a drawer and flicking his ear in the process.

"The night bird that kidnaps people?"

"I'm surprised you remember that one."

"Me too." He continued to roll the furry stalk around in his hands.

"He causes all of this cold weather." She gathered her hair around her elbows and shivered for good measure. She began to package a bundle of foxglove seeds to keep them fresh. They were used in many love spells, making them a hot commodity in the springtime.

A stray seed on the counter could barely be seen from Samuel's position on the stool. He reached for it and took it into his palm. He hadn't used his magic in over a week.

Folding his fingers over the germ, he closed his eyes and allowed only a worm of energy to snake down his arm. Using his elbow to prod Bea's leg, she turned to watch him open his hand. He offered her a single pale pink bell flower of foxglove. She didn't smile at first. But once she did, it was big and warm. Pinching it from him, she tucked it into the blouse pocket that set above her heart. Then he went back to reading about Gerd and fiddling with the Albatross plume.

It took only an hour on the stool for Bea to ask about Gideon.

"Haven't seen him around the store in a while," she said.

Samuel barely raised his eyebrows at the bait.

"You haven't been sent in on many errands either..."

Samuel flipped a page in a book on goddesses in his lap.

"He was supposed to help Helen move that new cabinet set into the living room, wasn't he?"

"We don't have any new cabinets."

"Ah, well," Bea sighed, "at least I know you're listening."

He smirked and shook his head.

"Your mom's trying really hard, Sam."

"I let her make me lasagna last night," he told her.

"You guys seem better." Bea admired something outside the window, tightening twine through and around her fingers. "Have you tried talking to Gideon?"

"What do you think Isis actually means in Egyptian?"

"He's sure to be worried about you."

"How many people can say they actually speak ancient Egyptian, right?"

“Samuel.”

“The name could mean ‘lady with really freaky arms’ for all we know.”

“Oh, stop it already.” Bea snatched the book and smacked Samuel across the temple with it. “It means Queen of thrones.”

Rubbing his forehead with the hand, he scowled.

Shushing him, she continued, “You need to talk to Gideon.”

“I don’t.”

Letting out a long sigh, she stabbed her fingers into her temples. She opened a drawer in her desk and grabbed a piece of cottonwood bark, sticking it into her mouth. Samuel could hear her teeth grinding against it.

“Mom told me about him and Brady, Bea.” He looked down to his hands, fiddling his fingers. “What am I supposed to do now that I know?”

A soft hand came to his head. “You’ve always been a good kid,” she said, adding, “mostly.”

He grinned and waved her hand away, ducking to where she couldn’t reach.

“I think you should talk to him.”

The books he began to carry around did make his shoulders a little sore. But he pulled them out at lunch, between classes, a couple times even laying them across his lap beneath the desk. He read about spells that could extract teeth, turn skin blue, allow lambs to talk, and turn a newt to stone. There were others too, less exciting. How to banish rust from a kettle, how to keep frost off of the petunias, how to make a hungry stomach feel full. And then there were big spells. Ones to realign the gravity of stars, to silence storms, to

change the very earth beneath his feet. The kind of power he'd need to do such things sent a shudder down Samuel's spine. The snake coiled in his root chakra stirred in response.

The third day with the books, Samuel's knees tapped his elbows and Bea had taken to cleaning the wooden votive bowls with beeswax and olive oil. It happened quietly, between the pages of an air spell manual. He'd only pulled it off of the shelf due to the gold-leafed owl eyes shining on the spine, which made the book look interesting enough to pull. The explanation for an enchantment that would heat the air around a wand in varying diameters had been starred \* by a red pen. A wrinkled tear of paper had been folded into the crease, serving as a makeshift bookmark. Samuel plucked it out and unfolded it, anticipating a library due-back date slip. Instead, in the same red ink, a small scribbled note said: *heat sphere bigger and hotter in high humidity*. The piece of paper was a strip of what once had been a math test, recognizable by the splices of faded formulas. And then Samuel fell off the stool, sent the book sliding across the floor and almost swallowed his tongue. *Brady Shelley* sat in the name blank at the top of the stripe of paper, in the same hand as the red pen.

Bea sputtered around at the clatter, fussing over Samuel and speaking words that reached his ears muffled. She bent down to collect the book, stepping back as he launched himself atop of it.

"We need to work on your balance," she said, having assured that he was uninjured.

Nodding, heart still pounding, Samuel decided he had better get home.

Beatrice stuck a couple of Lobelia stocks in his pocket to keep his head spins in check. In large enough quantities it could take the brain to different planets. The native

Americans had known that. But, they'd also known that small pinches were enough to settle the nerves.

He didn't let the book out of his sight. At dinner with Helen, they ate an eggplant parmesan. It smelled garlicky and hot but turned to dirt in his mouth. The book rested on his thighs, feeling like it weighed a thousand pounds. His mother talked about setting up the spring altar and whether or not she wanted to select a new goddess to feature, since the flower arrangements for Cordelia withered so quickly. He didn't engage much in the conversation. But Helen appreciated his recently renewed presence in the house and did little to jeopardize it.

Outside with Merlin, Samuel traced the edges of the cover with his finger as the pup chased sounds behind the house. Each time his finger paused, close to flipping it open, his heart heaved. Pulling some of the shoots from his pocket, he mashed them between his molars. It didn't do much to calm his nerves but it did bring a buzz to the back of his eyeballs.

He could see Brady walking through the section of the library that housed these books. He didn't know what Brady had looked like, but the face he saw was clear. The same beady eyes, the same dark features, the same sliding expressions. Samuel could see a bony hand flitting over the shelves and the spines along them. And then those golden owl eyes would've flashed. Even if the description of the book didn't sound so enticing, Brady would've dumped it into a basket on his arm and moved on.

Once Merlin had tuckered himself out in the mud, Samuel took him upstairs and plopped him down on his dog bed. Sitting down on his own, it took a few deep breaths to poke his pointer finger into Brady's place in the book and slowly peel it open. The spell

wasn't really anything special. Sam had seen many versions of the same in pages of other books. He'd even generated similar heat fields with his own wand. It took some energy, and a few muttered phrases, which could make the sphere glow different colors. The green one reminded him of the aurora borealis, so it was his favorite. But there was nothing combustible about the spell, nothing to send forests or human bodies up in flames. Samuel swallowed a hard knot in his throat.

He ran the pad of his finger over the four strike marks of the star, feeling the indentations as if they were some sort of Braille he'd be able to read. But he couldn't hear anything of Brady. Carefully, Samuel slid the placeholder from the book, rubbing the wrinkles over and over to listen to the crinkling. He folded and unfolded the strip of paper that held only a name and eight words. But with those, he was sure he could feel Brady practically breathing next to him, pawing through the same pages to itch the same itch plaguing Sam.

The words on the scrap didn't even yield much insight or complexity but they did make him stare at the spell for hours, reading and re-reading it and its neighbors. He had to entertain a small smile at the fact that a math test had found been more useful to Brady as a bookmark than as much else. Sam considered his algebra class about as valuable.

He had dreamt of Brady a few times since his mother had told him the truth. It didn't always go the same way. Sometimes it took a long time for him to cook up the spells. Sometimes it wasn't more than just a shot of light in the sky. He didn't die the same way each time either. Brady, that is. The magic took his skin right off once, then sizzled up each piece and other part. Another time, all that was left was a tear in the fabric, a hole in the air where a boy used to be.

Waking up from these dreams happened pretty much the same way each time, sputtering, sweating, heart hammering. He screamed only once. Helen came to check on him. He didn't tell her about the dream. But she sat on the side of his bed until he fell asleep again anyway.

Samuel began to pick through the books much more thoroughly. Not just for bookmarks either. For any sign of intelligent life. Another asterisk, or a comment, or maybe just an underline in that tell-tale red ink.

He read the rest of the owl air book without finding anything. A study on the magic of Haitian mammalois and then another anthology on the spiritual conjurations of John Dee. It wasn't until he ruffled through a dry manual on trivial table tricks that another creased paper marker stopped him. It was a stupid trick, how to levitate a deck of cards and manipulate them into a bouquet of roses, gin rummy roses. On a thin strip of the same math test as before, Brady wrote: *show to mom*. Samuel put the note back where he'd found it and shut the book, laying it on his deck. He climbed into bed and didn't open the book again.

...

The bag on his back hung low, full of all the books he'd checked out in the last week. Staring at the ground to steer clear of patches of ice, he came toe to toe with a pair of worn hiking boots.

"Your mom told me she's seen you reading a lot of library books lately," Gideon said.

Samuel expected him to stand or to yell. But he stayed seated, looking up. Samuel said nothing.

“I didn’t expect you to be excited to see me.” Gideon shrugged and ran his hands through his hair. “But, I would like to speak to you.”

Using one of his tennis shoes to scratch his other ankle, Samuel’s eyebrows narrowed. “I need to return my books first.”

Gideon nodded. “Okay.”

Samuel took his time depositing each of the books into the return slot. He’d had a hard time deciding whether to return Brady’s traces to where he’d found them, or keep them for himself. In the end, they all returned to their proper homes, doing nothing more than reminding Samuel that he was walking the same footfalls Brady, too, had walked. Which, in itself, was enough to give him terrible nightmares.

Gideon offered to drive him home and Samuel accepted. They filled the space between them with meaningless talk about Merlin. How much he’d grown, how little he’d learned, how much Helen complained about his smell. Gideon asked about their connection, if Merlin had aided in helping him connect with the spiritual, if the pup had done anything extraordinary. Samuel explained that mostly, Merlin was just really good at being a dog.

They left the car in front of the house but didn’t go through the front door. Around the back and into the woods, the two made their way back to the clearing that used to serve as the space for lessons. Samuel hadn’t been there since that day at Renata’s house. He’d tried to bury the memory deep in the dirt in his belly. But the Sycamores remembered, the Silver Maples remembered. The pine marten skittering around the edge of the clearing remembered. It might have been better to find a different spot, a fresh spot, one without the whispers. But they came to the place where they knew each other best.

For a while, neither had much to say. And so they didn't say anything. Gideon lifted his chin to the sky and closed his eyes, drawing in the fresh air. Samuel played with the strings at the bottom of his pockets and traced shapes into the mud with his shoes. A paperclip in his left pocket disappeared and reappeared between his fingers.

"A lot has happened since we last spoke," Gideon began.

Samuel didn't know how much the guide knew about what had happened with Edie.

"It's a small town, Samuel."

"Unfortunately."

"Secrets don't stay secrets for long," Gideon said. "Especially when they involve the likes of Edie Shelley."

The boy looked down to the growing tangle of shapes at his feet. "Helen told me how he died."

Gideon reacted only slightly, taking his hands and folding them to rest at his abdomen.

"And that you were his mentor," Samuel paused.

The man's face tightened, his mouth firm, his eyebrows drawn. A long moment and a few breaths later, he said, "I've spent many months of many years trying to account for what went wrong. But it all comes down to the truth that I deserted Brady in a dark corridor, taking the only lantern with me when I left. He was left to fend for himself, to stumble upon the unseen corners and upturned stones alone."

Samuel couldn't make eye contact with the mentor for fear of the stinging in his eyes. He'd seen Brady's path. Or at least some small part of it. He'd chosen some of the same forks to follow, some of the same stones to unearth. How far into the labyrinth did Brady

wander before he lost footing? How far had Samuel already come? He choked on bile at the back of his throat.

Gideon gave him time to hear everything that had been said. But he needed to continue, “There’s more to this story that you need to be privy to, Samuel.”

He shivered.

“There was great chaos within the coven that coincided with your father’s decision to leave.”

A wire began to tighten around Samuel’s lungs; he could hear his father clomping through the forest around them, whistling for his bird dog. He could hear the silence as his father crept toward a snowshoe hare. He could hear the snap of a snare around the ankle of a black rat. He could smell the pine on Gil’s coat as he tucked Sam into bed.

“Not only was your mother going through a tumultuous time—” Gideon pulled his jacket collar up against a sudden chill, “so was Edie Shelley.”

Sam’s feet tingled with needles and his head swam, knitting the peripheral trees together. He sunk down hard onto the ground, unaware of the cold or the damp or the numb thumping in his skull.

“It was high trapping season. The forest was dry enough to allow for easy tracking. Gil had set at least a few dozen traps within a couple miles of the house. There was a clearing, much like this one, at the heart of your father’s favored grounds. Brady had been tampering with archaic Byzantine magic, the likes of which haven’t been used since biblical times. I cannot be precisely sure of which exactly it might have been. But, when I finally reached the scene, I could trace the footprint of ancient transmutation magic. The kind that

can alter the atomic frequency of anything in its surrounding radius.” Gideon ran his hands over his face. “The spell unsettled the very cells of the body from which it came.”

“I—I don’t understand.” Samuel, cross-legged and wide eyed, stared at the ground without blinking.

“There was a trap that had been set within a few yards of the space that Brady would use. Although I can’t be exactly sure as to why, since the noise of his spells probably kept the skittering animals from building any burrows nearby. It had been a clear day, hardly any fog. And even in the evening light your father could continue gathering his catches. He must not have heard the magic. Or maybe he had focused so intently on his search for the traps that the sound did not draw his attention. We found an entire heap of hares that had been slung over Gil’s shoulder.”

Samuel’s jammed the webbings of his hands together, lacing and unlacing his fingers. “Dad knew about this stuff, though. Mom’s witch stuff. He knew everything.”

Gideon’s chin tilted faintly toward his shoulder and it was enough. A shooting pain broke across Sam’s jawbone as his teeth ground against each other. His fingers pushed into his eyes and his nose flared against the biting air. Gideon’s hands waved around for a moment as he reached toward the boy. But instead he decided to put them into his pockets and hang his head. The outburst of emotion didn’t last more than two minutes. It felt more like a half hour to the both of them.

“Samuel.” Gideon’s voice stayed low and yielding. “He knew that you were special. He knew what you were, what you are. He knew that you were—”

“Like Brady.” An icy silence expanded between them. “He saw him, didn’t he?” Samuel pressed. “He saw Brady die. He saw Brady get eaten by his own magic.”

Gideon winced.

“That’s why he left, isn’t it?”

Gideon let out a long sigh. “Samuel, he wanted to take you away.”

“I’m not a child!” Samuel’s shout echoed through the trees. “Just tell me what happened.”

“He didn’t want any of this for you. The Wicca, the spirits, the energy, the coven,” Gideon raised his voice and motioned around himself, “this whole place.”

“And mom wouldn’t let me go.”

“You have to understand, Samuel. That the safest place for you to be extraordinary, as you grew, was this place. A place that knew.” He cleared his throat. “Your mother loves you.”

Samuel expected some sort of heart ache, or stomach ache, or any ache really. But he didn’t feel anything, not even the bites of the burs around his ankles. Renata’s father. His own. The guilt swelled in his chest between his lungs.

“We have another topic at hand that needs to be discussed,” Gideon continued. He looked down to his hands rubbing them against the denim of his jeans. “It’s come to the critical point in your practice. The time when Brady began to wander. I know you have steered yourself away from me recently, but I am here to make you an offer.” He took a deep breath.

Samuel’s face remained stony, his hands balled tightly with nails digging into skin.

“If you wish to continue your studies, if you commit to pursuing them further, I will commit to you, also. I will go with you, away from here. So that through challenges, you can see vast growth. We can develop your ability and the possibilities locked within you.”

Eyes set away from Gideon, brows pinched, Samuel thought. "But why would we have to leave?"

"It is necessary."

"Why?" Samuel stood, his arms bracing at his sides. "Why would we leave?"

Gideon's temper flared and blood rose in his neck. "Look how much damage you have caused already. Look at the pain you have caused here!" His pointer finger jabbed towards the ground underneath their feet.

Sam dropped his gaze and flexed his jaw. He could still see Renata's dad passing through his energy, could still see her red-rimmed funeral eyes, could still see her trails of crumpled tissues. And he couldn't see much of his father. Which was enough to hurt.

Voice lowered once more, his guide carried on, "You have great potential. Potential to be more than you are. You can be extra ordinary. But, in order to do such big things, you must detach from here."

Samuel stayed quiet for a while. His hands relaxed and came to rest in his pockets. He didn't lift his eyes when he began to speak, "how do I know to trust you?" he drew a breath, "the way everything. . .ended last time."

Gideon placed his hands in a prayer position. Expanding his chest with all that it could hold and whistling it out his nostrils, he raised his hands to his forehead and his forehead to the sky. He sighed, releasing his hands. "You do not know. Cannot know. But, I know that I have learned. I have grown. And I do not intend to fail again."

"How can you be sure?" Samuel demanded. "Brady died. I could die."

Gideon folded his arms in front of his chest. "I cannot be sure of anything. But you can be sure that, if you decide to go with me," he promised, "I will not let you fall."

They, together and quiet, watched the sun exit the sky in its usual, graceful way. The night had stretched over the sky by the time they stood. Making their way back to the house, a bumbling Merlin scampered up to them once they were within a mile. Samuel could hear Helen calling for the dog, who'd run from her sight. When the three of them stepped out into the disc of the back porch light, her mouth closed with a click.

"Gideon," she said, "I'm sorry I didn't make dinner."

"Not a worry, Helen. I was on my way out." He placed a strong hand on Samuel's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. Leaning close, he murmured, "In two days, after school, I will be there. Come. Or don't. Either way, I'll be gone." And then he rounded the side of the house and out of sight.

Samuel and his mother tiptoed around each other when they got back into the house. Helen bounced on the balls of her feet, eager to ask about the conversation that she missed. But she held it in, busying herself refreshing the incense sticks and tending the fireplace. Her ceremonial cloak lay across the table, chalk outlining the holes that her heels had worn in the hem and embers had singed in the fabric. The ancient sewing machine took up nearly a quarter of the table, its metal belly hanging over its stand. Helen settled herself into a chair and cranked up the machine to busy her hands. It chugged through the spools, each needle prick running down their spines.

Tupperware packed with dinners past filled the fridge. Sam filed through them: manicotti, teriyaki chicken, Portobello skewers. But his head filed through images of his father, of Renata's, of his nightmares of Brady instead. And he didn't really feel much like eating. Helen, hands still pinched around a corner of her robes, had her eyes trained on him as he turned.

Without warning, a faucet at the back of Samuel's throat opened, "why didn't you tell me about dad? You lied. You can't tell me about Brady and not tell me that he's the reason my dad left. You can't do that. It's not fair. I should've known. I should always have known. This whole time you let me believe that he left because of you. You didn't have anything to do with it. He left me. He left because of me."

The gobs of water that had gathered in the wells of Helen's eyes spilled over like her son's words. "It's not like that, Samuel. Please. He left because I wouldn't let you go. I couldn't let him take you from the only place that would keep you safe."

"Keep me safe?" Samuel's voice boomed through the kitchen. "I have made this place anything but safe! Look what I've done here. Dad left. You're miserable. Renata's dad is dead. Look at what I've done."

His mother was surprised at the strength of her son's voice and her eyes widened. "No, Sam. No. What are you saying? I'm anything but miserable. I would do anything for you. You are my reason for living. I stay here and with you because it's where I'm meant to be. Your father had nothing to do with that."

"You're miserable without him and he was miserable because of me."

"Where is this coming from? You're babbling."

"Listen to me! You're not listening," he insisted.

"Samuel, eat something please." His mother ran her hands through her hair and pulled it through a hair tie.

"Mom!"

"Hush, now. You aren't making any sense."

All that Samuel smelled was smoke and all he saw sang red. His father's fur coated jacket hanging next to the door, the bloody rungs around the ankles in the traps, the shining handles on Renata's dad's coffin, the color of the heat that rose in Renata's cheeks before he'd kissed her. Had he kissed her? It was almost too much. And then it began to build. In his chest, behind his sternum it scorched and throbbed. Merlin hopped around his feet, trying to distract him or alert him or move him, anything.

Blinding light began to glow from the center of his palms, charring the very flesh against his hands. It filled the entire kitchen, blaring out through the windows and screaming into the night. It was loud and blackened their ear drums as much as it did their eyes. With the heels of her hands jammed into her ears and her elbows pinned against her face, Helen cowered from the energy.

Samuel could feel the portal of the astral realm near. He could feel the kindle in his chest shine in response. It yawned at the prodding of the magic, crystal facets throwing light through the aperture. A shot of freezing air blasted his face. And then, less than a glimpse of a heap of rabbit furs passed at the other edge of the breach, hauled on the broad back of a familiar man.

A deep whine hissed from the back of Merlin's throat and his teeth bore. The claws on his hind legs pierced the tennis shoes on Samuel's feet. With a lunge powerful enough to launch up to the ceiling, Merlin locked his jaw around Samuel's wrist. Absorbing energy in pulses, the dog's mass trembled with each wave. As the soft body channeled some of the magic, the room dimmed.

It subsided quickly, just like it had started. With only a faint, residual smell of soot in the air, the light had been extinguished. They both collapsed, Samuel against the counter

and Helen against the table, gasping. Merlin's mouth still held around Sam's arm. Carefully, he placed a hand on his companion's head and urged his jaw open. For as sharp as Merlin's teeth were, they'd left no marks. The dog slumped against his master, still shaking. Samuel could have set him down, but he kept him in his arms instead.

The entire room faded back into view in pieces, the walls soaking their color back out of the air, the air itself taking a moment to unbleach. The robes on the table bled back to black, still attached to the needle of the metal belly. It took a few moments for the ringing in Sam's eardrums to quiet and a few more for the black spots in his eyes to dissipate.

"See what I mean?" Sam let his chin fall to his chest. His head hadn't fit around what he'd seen through the crack in the plane. And he certainly wasn't about to tell his mother about it. With his dog warm against him, chest huffing still, he turned to head to the stairs.

"Samuel, stop," his mother said, "you need to look past this time of struggle. You are special. You always have been."

"Quit it."

"Samuel, please." Helen's hands grabbed at him as he moved to leave. "I love you."

"You sound like Edie." Her son's upper lip curled in distaste and he spun on her, "get off of me." With that and his spirit companion in his arms, he left her alone.

...

The pack on his shoulders practically floated now that his library books had taken up their original shelves. That day in physics he walked in to see Renata in a seat in the front row of the classroom. She traced a loopy pattern on her notebook with a purple pen, not glancing up when anyone passed. Samuel would have sworn her pen stopped when he walked by. He swayed between two different desks, one within three chairs of her, the

other two. Warily, he set the bag on the closer chair, gauging her reaction. The pen still looped. He thought of coughing, or making some other sign of his presence. But, deciding against tempting the fates, he slid noiselessly into the chair, holding onto the edges of the desk in case her backward gaze alone could send it tumbling through the room. She didn't look back. And the desk didn't tumble. Nor, to his flurried pulse's delight, did she move. He smiled small at his victory.

But the elation of the moment of joy fizzled quickly. The monotony of markers against a whiteboard stole any semblance of distraction Samuel had created for himself. Her braid, slick and want of any softness, had eleven rungs that he counted enough times for it to become a sort of mantra. Between the verses, her father's infuriated face would surface, or Gil's fingers around the neck of a lemming. Losing count, Sam would start at the top again, the place where her hair met her neck.

If he left with Gideon, how many braids would he see? He couldn't bear the idea of never counting again. Starting again, he winced. He couldn't count anymore, not with the soggiess of the cemetery grass pulling at his shoes and the pile of abandoned rabbits smelling rancid. And so he looked to the window where the grey of the sky held flush against forest's upstretched arms.

During the lunch hour, it happened. At the end of a bag of barbecue potato chips and halfway through his roast beef sandwich, a rustle of plastic drew the attention of the cafeteria. Turning, like the rest, Samuel saw a face that brought his blood to a boil. Preening the edges of a banner as it got hung on the wall, she flitted between both sides to assure it was level. Edie squawked at the hanging men, up a bit, down a bit, too crooked, she said. It spelled out the date and time for some upcoming dance in curly letters. The idea of such a

social situation churned Samuel's stomach almost as badly as the sight of her. Glancing to the other walls, he tried to plot the safest way to escape the large room without being spotted.

Talons wrapped over his shoulder.

"You look well, dear." Her voice raised gooseflesh on his neck.

He recoiled from her hand. "What are you doing here?"

She folded her hands beneath her ample chin and looked down at him with drooping eyes. "Just helping out where I can." She smiled. "Like always."

He shook his head and looked away, shoveling the rest of his lunch into a bag. "I have class."

"I know you do." She tugged at the cuff of her sleeve. "You didn't tell your mother about accessing a portal during your episode last night," she said, "did you?"

The heat that rose in his face prickled. "Excuse me?"

"Don't you think I have a way of sensing these things by now?" Her eyes twinkled. "Do you know how long I spent trying to detect big magic?"

For precisely as long as Brady had been abusing it on his own, Samuel imagined.

"I'd be a fool if I hadn't mastered it by now."

"But how would you—"

Her round backside thumped into a chair, overhanging the seat on each side. She shooed his question out of the way with a wandering hand. "It doesn't really matter, dear." Leaning close in, she lowered her voice. "What matters is what you saw and how you did it."

He couldn't help the satisfied grin that surfaced. "I don't really know what I did exactly."

"You accessed the other realm, Samuel. The one of truest manifestations."

"Well, yeah. I'm not entirely sure how I did that. But I think I also..." he hesitated.

"Saw your dad?" she answered.

Samuel shrugged, looking to the pile of sandwich droppings on the table. "I think I might have."

"I think you did." It was her turn to upturn her lips. "And I think you can do much more than that."

"But, no, it was so random," he stammered, "It was a fluke really. I would have no idea how to conjure anything like that again."

"I could show you how."

The pressure in his chest built a little, his heart rate rising. "Really?"

"Samuel," she clucked, flapping her arms at her sides, "what do you think I'm here for anyway."

"You'd let me come back and study with you?"

Her cheeks pinched up against her eyes and shined with delight. "You're always welcome at my home, dear." She reached up and pet his hair off to one side. "Always."

The three passing period tones sounded through the PA system above the double doors to the cafeteria. Samuel's mind continued to play the sight through the portal on loops, his fingers flicking off the sandwich crumbs one by one.

"Class, Samuel?" Edie chirped. "You wouldn't want to be late."

He snapped straight up in his chair, nodding and glancing around.

“Yeah. Can’t be late.” Slung his bag up on to his back, he felt the gentle wing of hope flutter in his heart. “Bye, Edie.”

She wiggled her plump fingers at him as he rushed off to class.

...

The rest of the day passed very slowly, the hands on the clocks checked their cuticles and twiddled with their nails before doing anything about moving on to the next hour. Samuel wanted to savor these hours, the hours that *could* be his second to last day in school. They should’ve been special, or monumental in some way. He waited for the teachers to break out in song, someone new to draw his attention, or maybe just a different buzz of energy to hum through the air. Instead, he spent the hours wastefully, watching the clock or the window or the back of the heads in front of him, none of which were graced with braids. Besides, now he had the opportunity to have many more days, years, however long here, under the watchful eye of Edie’s post.

Samuel felt tired. The image of the rabbit pelts hadn’t left his mind quiet since he’d seen it. He walked home along the side of road, every once in a while reaching out to tickle the branches of the trees. Samuel had never left Lock Haven. He didn’t know what other birds would sound like, or how the wind would whistle. He didn’t know how accessible a burger would be, or if people would look at his jeans the way he looked at kimonos. He didn’t know if there would be people at all. And now he had a chance to stay, to work again with Edie, to find a way to find his dad again.

The warm smell of butter and thyme puffed out the front door as Sam opened it. He stood there, relishing it. What would Helen say if she knew about what he’d seen through

the portal? If she knew about Edie? He chased the thoughts away, they'd do him no good. Merlin bounded to the rug, huffing and wiggling around the way that he did.

"Mom?" Sam called. She responded from the kitchen. Instead of laying his bag in front of the door which always irritated Helen, he set it on the staircase up to his room. Running his hands along the walls, he made his way to the back of the house.

He spent the entire time his mother spent cooking at the table, keeping her company. Her ceremony robe had received its stitching and hung over the back of one of the chairs. Sam rubbed the familiar, heavy fabric between his fingers. Merlin was let out into the yard, like usual. But neither of them accompanied him, both content to stay where they were, separated by the counter island, laughing when flour puffed up into her face.

The baked chicken and rolls didn't taste any different than every other time Helen had made them. Still, they stayed at the table for longer, taking more time to finish their plates and then more just to sit. A few times, Sam thought to bring up his dad, or his outburst, or what had happened in the lunchroom. But a kind word or clinking fork always interrupted, so he didn't. Afterward, Samuel even helped dry the dishes.

Once Helen had gone to bed, he traipsed through every room of the home. The hearth had been cleared finally of the Imbolc fire, although the cinders remained. The formal living room they never used still had footprints in the carpet from Sam's storm through it a few days before. He traced the strangely figured knobs on the sink in the downstairs bathroom. He touched the curve of the stair railing that his mother polished every day.

Beneath the same comforter he'd had since he was ten, he stared at his ceiling and counted all of the glow-in-the-dark stars that had managed to stay up there until he fell asleep.

...

The next day at school, Samuel expected to feel nervous. He waited for his heart to reel, sweat to stain beneath the arms of a conscientious black tee, the pitch of his pulse. But, no such anxiety came. He didn't chew a sore into the side of his cheek. He didn't develop a rash on his chest. He didn't even check the clock in his last two classes.

It probably would have been advisable for him to come up with some sort of plan before exiting the school. Maybe, if he intended to speak to Gideon or just go straight to the car. Or would there be a car? Maybe there would be nothing more than a lonely man standing right off the curb, next to the moms that pick the freshmen up in SUVs. But Sam didn't consider much at all. Which, he regretted later.

It was an end day bell like any other. The PA system bleeped and the students rose from their chairs in coordinated chaos, scrambling to the halls and out to the courtyard. Samuel did no such scrambling. He took his time, tightening the zipper of his back pack and allowing others to jostle ahead of him. By the time he reached the double-door exit, the flag had already been lowered and folded by the kids that wore their Eagle Scout pins to school.

Just off the curb, in front of a suburban, Gideon sat in the driver seat with his elbow resting out the open window. Sam stared at the vehicle for an extended minute, the engine rumbling, ready to make sure Gideon got gone.

And then he spun on his heel and headed to the side parking lot where a different engine continued to run. Edie leaned over and unlatched the passenger door, her mouth

lifting widely as he scooted in. Only once he had settled in to the seat and fastened the belt did he dare a glance back toward Gideon's car. It had already left. A small pain pinched in his chest and he brought his eyes back to the dashboard as Edie pulled out.

"I'm glad to see you looking so happy today, Samuel." She bobbed her head from side to side, tapping against the steering wheel. "We have much so ahead of us."

"Do you care if I change the radio?" he asked without waiting for her to answer. He settled on a station playing a song he didn't recognize just to turn the volume up over the hard knot his throat kept trying to swallow.

Using his nails, he picked at his cuticles, biting here, tearing there. Edie told him to stop. He didn't. Grabbing a particularly thick piece of flesh away from his thumb, he hissed as it ripped back to his top knuckle. Popping it into his mouth, he sucked at the red there that tasted like tin. They pulled into the neighborhood and closed in on Edie's house.

Three things happened at the exact same time. All three of which shocked Samuel's heart into chugging like a piston. The car's right wheel popped up over the curb, throwing the cab into a teeter, Helen Cornwall threw her body against the passenger side window, and Edie let out a shriek that rang in his ears.

His mother's fists hammered against the glass, and although he couldn't make out the words, her face beat purple from screaming. He thought she might rip him out but instead she threw herself around the front of the car and wrenched the driver door open. With the car still rolling, Edie tumbled out, the seat belt tangling around her. Pulse crackling, Sam dove over the shift stick and flung it into park. The entire car lunged forward at the groan of the transmission.

Sam flew from the car, not bothering to shut the door. Edie had recovered from her fall and stood in a low stance, feet wide, her round body balanced. Helen had a wand in her hand, and muttered a Latin spell Sam didn't recognize. Merlin's sharp barks sounded from Helen's car at the side of the street. At the sight of his companion, he jumped through the break in the window and bounded across the lawn.

"You stay away from him!" Helen shouted. Her spell hadn't done much more than charge the air around them. Sam had never seen his mother do any magic and it made his lunch rise in his throat.

"This is what he wants, Helen." Edie's hands flexed at the end of straight arms, a defensive posture. "Let him be."

"He is still a child. He does not know what he wants!" Helen's wand emitted a shower of black sparks as she shook her arms.

Samuel crossed the yard in four full paces, reaching out to bat the wand out of his mother's hand. "I'm not a child."

She took two steps back.

"He is ready to grow and I'm the one he's chosen. He doesn't need you anymore!" Edie advanced, shoving Sam to the side. Merlin let loose a fierce snarl and snapped at her hand, she barely noticed. The dog stayed positioned between Sam and the women, the hair on the back of his neck standing.

Nose to nose the two mothers' flared nostrils nearly touched.

A crack sounded, Helen having thrown an explosive powder to the ground. Edie reeled back and Sam threw his arm across his face. Ears still ringing, he saw Edie charge, her lips moving.

“Get away from me, Edie. Get away from my boy,” Helen shouted, moving back with each step Edie took toward her.

Stretching her arm across the distance between them, Edie laid a hand on her shoulder. Helen’s legs folded unresponsively and a sharp cry came from her when she thudded to the ground. Samuel’s heart thumped in his ears, the energy in his chest pulsed through him, bitter like anxiety. With a sloppy counter curse, he pressed a stream of white light toward his mother. It did enough to unbuckle her legs. He made a move to lunge between them, but not quickly enough. Helen’s hand had closed around another packet of herbs. With them in the center of her palm she leapt forward, shoving her hand into Edie’s face as she screamed. It took less than a second for the induced vomiting to begin. The sludge splashed against the concrete of the driveway.

Between intestinal gushes, Edie spat, “You crazy bitch.” Slosh. “How dare you.” Gasp. “Try and take this.” Splash. “After all I’ve lost.” Her teeth chattered.

Samuel moved toward his mother.

“You practically killed your own son.” Helen’s words clapped through the air like thunder. “I won’t let you ruin mine!”

Looking between the faces of the two women, every vein in Samuel’s body sang with grief. With a triple repetition spell and a few turns of the wrists, Samuel restrained them both to seated positions cross-legged on the ground. Having sucked the adrenaline from them, they both doubled over their knees, sobbing.

His head hung heavy, chin against chest. The few tears that fell disappeared into the grass. Merlin hadn’t moved, his perked ears still twitching.

“Sam?”

He turned and saw Gideon standing at the edge of the lawn, his eyebrows drawn. With little to no ceremony, he glanced back at the two kneeling figures and then to his guide. With slow, measured steps he walked to the edge of the property. The hand that came to Samuel's shoulder rested there lightly.

"Are you all right?" Gideon asked.

Sam nodded.

His guide took a long, deep breath and let out a reedy sigh. "Are you ready now?" A sad smile played on his lips.

"I think so," Sam said. With a short look back to his mom, her eyes were on him, her hands over her heart. Raising a hand to his own heart, he then turned and went with Gideon, Merlin at his heels.

The air in the car was warm and the seat welcomed him with a ready cushion. Merlin climbed between the front and back seats, his tail sweeping over Sam's face each time. Gideon asked if there were any final goodbyes to be made. Samuel thought about it for a moment before saying that yes, there was just one. It hadn't been out of his mouth for two minutes before they pulled up to her house. They'd headed that way from the start, Sam realized.

With the passenger door open, he stared at the Aldredge front door, its lion head knocker and handle gleamed. They'd been polished by many sympathetic hands over the last short while. He wasn't sure if she'd even be home. Or if she'd want to see him. And he didn't want their final interaction to be a tense one. Running his hands over his face, he groaned.

"Let's just go," he said.

“You don’t want to go in?”

“No.”

Gideon didn’t make any moves to get the car going. “You’re sure?”

“Can we go?” Sam’s voice rose.

Merlin bounced up from the back seat and over his lap. With two kind legs on the ground, he locked his jaw around Sam’s wrist and tugged, tugged, tugged him out.

“No, Merlin.” Sam tried to shake him off. “Down. Stop.”

The dog didn’t let go.

Sam stomped out of the car and the pup detached from his arm. Brushing shed hair from his jeans, he walked to the door. He grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it straight. His fist hit solid wood, once, twice more. She opened the door, her braid over her shoulder.

“Oh.” Her eyes widened big. “Sam. Hi.”

“Renata,” he began, his breath coming in wheezes, “how are you doing?”

Her forehead wrinkled. “I’m okay. Thanks.” Renata’s mother sang her name from somewhere inside the belly of the house.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt anything,” Samuel said, wringing his hands.

“No, no,” she promised, “we were just on our way to a fundraiser or something for heart disease.” She brought her arms across her chest, tucking a fallen piece of hair behind her ear.

“Heart disease?”

“Yeah.” She looked down her lashes to the ground. “Dad had it the last couple of years, so . . . we’re doing some charity stuff for the foundation.”

A helium balloon lifted his heart up among the clouds. “Right, of course.”

He smiled and gingerly outstretched his hand. She placed her fingers in his. "I'm not going to be around for a while," he told her. "But I couldn't leave without saying goodbye."

Bobbing her head slightly, she smiled. "Thanks for stopping."

"Good luck." He squeezed her hand.

She squeezed back.

With that, he stepped off the porch and made it back to the car. Merlin marched around on his lap and Gideon sang along to a song on the radio as they pulled away from the curb. She waved until they turned the corner at the end of the street. Samuel continued to wave for a few blocks more past that.