

Introduction

“Studies in Magical Realism” is a collection of magical realism made up of the short story “Lover’s Bane” and two excerpts from longer stories, “Blight” and “Don’t Drink the Water.” In order to combine my Creative Writing and French Language & Culture majors into one cohesive project, I decided to translate a portion of “Don’t Drink the Water.” Through this translation I explored translation as both a process and a craft. Additionally, “Blight” and “Don’t Drink the Water” are studies in sibling relationships and how they are affected by external pressures and looming danger, while “Lover’s Bane” and “Blight” are different takes on the juncture of plants, decay, and magic.

The short story “Lover’s Bane” takes place after the main character, Magdalene, discovers that Valery, her girlfriend, has been unfaithful. Magdalene breaks up with her, but her heartbreak does not fully set in until later, when she spots a book that Valery had wanted to borrow from her but would now never get the chance to read. Magdalene’s broken heart disrupts the connection between her magic and her garden, which begins dying in the same manner that her grandmother’s garden did after her grandfather passed away. Unwilling to accept another loss, Magdalene is left to find a solution in the short hours before the last of her plants will die. She succeeds after she and her roommate, Ansel, brew a dangerous potion called Lover’s Bane, which removes feelings of romantic attraction.

This is a story I wrote several years ago. It has not gone through that many revisions, as it is one of those pieces that you miraculously churn out in one night and then do not work on again. This is the only such story I have written in recent years. I have included it because it is one of two short stories that I’ve submitted for critique. While I do not tend to write short stories, I am still quite interested in the lore I created for Magdalene’s world and I think it is important to remind myself that this is an avenue I should explore more in the future. It also serves as an interesting point of contrast to the other pieces in my portfolio, which I wrote in later on. Since my freshman year, I have strayed away from

writing romance due to shifting interests. “*Lover’s Bane*” is not properly about romance, since Magdalene and Valery are already broken up when the story begins, but it sets up an emotional conflict that is not resolved through a character arc. Once I began to find platonic relationships more compelling, I also became more interested in writing out those character arcs that I skipped over in “*Lover’s Bane*.” If I circle back around to writing romance in the future, I hope that the time I dedicated to fleshing out other aspects of my characters will serve me well.

“*Blight*” is a story I started developing in 2016, when my writing process was much less refined, before I had explored more than a handful of narrative techniques. Its first working title was “*Gravitational Pull*,” and it was a story about soulmates and bond-based magic. Despite its longevity, this is a project that I feel is still very much a work in progress. The characters, setting, and plot underwent several major revisions, some of which occurred while I worked on this senior project, and I expect that there are more of those in this piece’s future!

As it stands, “*Blight*” follows a trio of siblings after one of them—Chester, the middle child—is asked by his boss to discreetly investigate some unknown magic endangering the lucrative Vaughn-Greer vineyard. The magic system is still based on bonds, but the study of magic is relatively new, which means that much of what is known about it is not easily accessible to laypeople. As someone who does not have an inclination for magic himself but *does* have both a celebrated curse breaker (Chester’s older sister, Estelle) and a leading researcher in botanical theory of magic (Norah, the youngest sibling) in the family, he must force his siblings to put their resentment aside and lend him their expertise.

Originally, I set out to write what I have described to friends as a ‘wine drama’; essentially, a story that revolves around the breaking of international wine regulations. The laws around winemaking and classification are extensive and the history of wine fraud is *very* amusing. I went down a rabbit hole of legalese and stories of fraud and found myself researching a specific type of dessert wine called ice

wine, which is mostly produced in Germany and Canada due to the need to harvest the grapes while they are frozen. This type of wine is made at a winery ten minutes from my house—and a 375-milliliter bottle sells for 60 to 80 dollars. There are wines that sell at a much higher price than ice wine, but it is still fairly expensive. I knew I would be writing about greed and pride destroying my antagonist's life, but as I wrote I realized that the same can be said of my protagonists. The increasingly strained relationship between the siblings constantly derails their investigation and at times puts their lives at risk, leading to further arguments that threaten to break them apart and leave the mystery unsolved.

After some recent personal life events involving my own siblings, I realized that this story, more than anything else, is about sibling relationships and how complex they are. This realization has guided my revision process, acting as the central theme while pushing other themes to a secondary level. In later drafts, I began to truly explore what reconciliation is and what it requires in order to satisfy all parties, if such a thing is possible. Chester is the one in charge of the investigation, and as the one who invited Estelle and Norah to the vineyard, their performance and behavior will reflect on him and either boost or hinder the career he is worked hard for. Estelle and Norah have a years-long grudge based on Estelle's abandonment of the family in pursuit of a career abroad—and the ability to provide financial support for her then-18- and 13-year-old siblings—and her subsequent disappearance from their lives. This is not a coming-of-age story. I like to think of it as what comes after. No one stops growing up once they hit 18; these siblings are in their 20s and 30s and they still have a long way to go. The portion of the story included in this project does not stray too far into that process; mostly it involves Chester mediating between Estelle and Norah as his own resentment finally takes center stage. This will contribute to the rising action and eventually the climax of the story.

“Don't Drink the Water” has more topical sibling conflicts, more of the lighthearted arguments that briefly feature in “Blight.” The conflict in “Don't Drink the Water” is, later on, an ‘individual vs society’ story rather than an ‘individual vs individual’ story. Hudson and Hal are twins who accidentally

catch the attention of a fae, a member of a dangerous race of magic users, and have to work together to find a way to escape his attention. I feel that this is the strongest piece in the collection despite the fact that I typically detest writing in the first person. Like “*Lover’s Bane*,” this is a good example of a time that pushing myself out of my comfort zone produced favorable results. “*Don’t Drink the Water*” is also the most distanced from a real-world setting; the time period and geography are purposefully ambiguous, but notably Western. This is a story that will test my ability to do in-depth world building over the course of a longer project; pacing and reader comprehension are two things that I keep in mind when writing. With this piece I paid special attention to properly pacing the exposition and showing the readers enough of the character’s personalities and inner conflicts to pique the interest of the audience without giving too much information at once.

As my strongest piece as well as the only piece written in the first person, “*Don’t Drink the Water*” is the best option for a translation. There are many differences between French and English that I had to pay attention to while translating this piece; it is worth noting that some of the difficulty came from the fact that Hudson, the narrator of this first chapter, is a 14-year-old boy and speaks like one, but I do not have much experience with French slang. The story has a close perspective and the tone of the narration is very casual, which means that matching that style was made more difficult by my more formal knowledge of French. I ended up consulting a friend whose first language is French; she has both a working knowledge of current slang and the grammatical knowhow to tell me when I implemented it incorrectly. In the end, it was more effective to revise the verbs in certain sentences than it was to substitute nouns for their slang versions. French is also an extremely gendered language in which all objects are assigned masculine or feminine, which is something English lacks. As I have never written prose in French before, this is a component of writing that I do not have a lot of experience with. Adjective agreement and articles, among other things, had to be taken into careful consideration during

translation to avoid misgendering my own characters or referring to the wrong subject and confusing the reader.

While translating, I had to constantly weigh my desire to translate as literally as possible in order to preserve my original work (my French vocabulary is, admittedly, not as expansive as my knowledge of English) against the knowledge that even the best translations often have to make compromises because of grammatical and idiomatic differences. This is the translator's dilemma; should the end goal be to produce a translation that is as authentic as possible, or is it necessary to alter the text to not only make it readable, but to make it enjoyable? Some translations focus on modernizing older texts while others have been researched more thoroughly to provide a contemporary equivalent. Typically, authors outsource translations of their work, and translators translate into their first language. As the author of the original text, which is also a draft and not a published work, I had more flexibility than one would have in most translation projects. However, I still tried to translate "Don't Drink the Water" faithfully instead of flexibly, in order to give myself a more realistic translating experience. Some words needed substitution because they either do not exist in French or because they cannot be used in conjunction with the other words in the original sentence. At times, shifting the punctuation was necessary. I did this sparsely because I am keenly aware that punctuation is just as much of a stylistic choice as vocabulary.

The translation process made me more aware of the sentence structures I tend to use when I genuinely thought I could not notice them more than I already did. It also led me to consider whether some of these structures are specific to English, or perhaps genre; my experience with French novels is almost exclusively college-level realistic fiction used in class, whereas I tend towards fantasy, sci-fi, and even YA books when I read for pleasure in English. I hope to achieve the same effects in my translation as I do with the original. Moreover, I hope that this project will serve as a reminder to my future self that I can effectively use aspects of writing that I typically avoid or even dislike.

Lover's Bane

Magdalene is bundling merchant's breath on the floor of her tiny living room when the first of her plants start to die. She looks up from the fragile blossoms and catches sight of the book Valery wanted to borrow from her the last (final) time she'd visited the apartment. Magdalene had thrown it at her before Valery stormed out with Magdalene's broken heart in her hands. Vertigo hits her like a freight train slamming on its breaks; sudden, with a jolt of the stomach and an awful screech.

For about twenty seconds she's overwhelmed by grief, but anger flares up louder than the betrayal and blurs her vision. Then her head clears enough for her to hear the garden calling to her from the balcony, and she's tottering to her feet before she can properly see. Abandoning the potion components, she rushes outside with dread creeping up her throat.

The damage isn't that bad, objectively speaking. To an outsider, the garden might even look healthy. A bit overgrown in some places, riddled with a few shriveling leaves, bent stems, and, in the case of the plot of hellebores by the railing, a mild case of root rot, but healthy, nonetheless. The ivy creeping up the wall hangs heavy and green, providing shade for the pots of herbs she keeps for her roommate. Her balcony is a veritable city of potion components, overlapping and fighting for the biggest patches of sun, with barely enough room to walk down the makeshift aisles. It's all very normal.

That's the problem. Nothing about her garden should be normal. That's not how her magic *works*.

Magdalene sinks to her knees between a stout pot of bone clove and a discarded watering can, reaching out to feel the tall stalks of yellow cress by the door. When her hand makes contact with one, it sways a little under her touch. She can sense that something is off about it; instead of the usual rush of magic that indicates the plant's healthy growth, all she feels is a numbing, staticky crackle, like a limb

that's fallen asleep. The shoot eels strangely brittle under her touch. The woody fibers splinter apart under the gentle pressure of her thumb.

The other plants are in a similar shape. Outwardly, they appear healthy, if a little clumsily cared for, but Magdalene has been tending to plants since she learned how to walk. She would never leave a plant in anything less than perfect health—it's instinctual for her to pour her magic into them as she tends the garden. Now it seems that every spell she's cast over her garden has been unraveled. Without them, every flaw she's smoothed away will return all at once. There's no way they can handle that kind of strain.

She runs her fingertips over the petals of a sagging fire lily, trying to find a trace of the charm against overwatering she'd placed on it earlier that month. There's nothing, not even a wisp of the plant's natural affinity for fire evocation. All there is the same tingling buzz and general malaise. As she watches, the petals fold in on themselves, as if all the water in them is evaporating out. Color drains from the petals until they're an unhealthy yellow instead of burning orange.

Not much can combat the strength of nature magic, especially in the carefully cultivated garden of a plant mage. Magdalene knows exactly what's happening here. She'd seen it in action, once, and the aura of death that haunted the ground where hundreds of plants laid like soldiers fallen in battle is a memory that has never left her.

Something is festering in Magdalene's garden, and she knows exactly what she has to do to get rid of it. She rises to her feet, cracks her fingers, and gets to work.

Magdalene walks into her roommate's bedroom without bothering to knock. "Ansel!" She yells, her arms struggling to hold a small pharmacy's worth of brown paper packages. "I know you're here, you twiggy bastard. I need your help."

At first glance, the room appears empty. Magdalene knows better. She busies herself with clearing off Ansel's desk, brushing aside stray papers, empty potion bottles, and the odd snack wrapper, waiting him out.

Sure enough, there's a rustle and a thump from underneath the bed not long after. "You know I hate when you touch my stuff," he complains as he emerges, dust sticking to his skin. There's a cobweb stuck in his hair and lint clinging to his clothes, and Magdalene is certain that if she finds out what he was doing down there her blood pressure will rise more than it already has. On second thought, it's tempting—maybe it'll make her pass out, so she doesn't have to deal with any of this.

Unfortunately, she can't afford unconsciousness right now. There's an idea tickling the back of her mind; if she doesn't grab onto this thread and pull, no one else is going to be able to unravel this problem for her. "If you kept your room clean, I wouldn't have to move shit around." Magdalene sweeps a cluster of rubber bands and pencil shavings to the ground, tossing a packet of papers mercilessly after it. She has a garden full of magic plants that have no magic, a headache scraping its way up the back of her neck, and a ticking clock. Nowhere in that list is there room for her friend's habitual clutter.

Ansel sighs, knees cracking as he stands up. "What's all this for?" He asks, poking around at the packages now haphazardly piled on the desk.

"You're gonna help me brew lovers' bane," Magdalene says as confidently as she can, pitching her voice to leave no room for argument. She needs this done as soon as possible, because her plants can't survive without magic for long and the idea of watching them wither away makes her stomach churn painfully.

Ansel decides to argue anyways. Apparently she needs to work on her take-no-shit voice. “And why would I do that?” He asks, voice deliberately steady. His hands give his nerves away, frantic as he yanks them away from the sprigs of sage he was fiddling with, as if by touching the ingredients he might somehow become complicit. “Lovers’ bane is one misstep away from poison. I know you know this. *Poison*, Mags. I’m not helping you accidentally kill some poor stranger.”

She pulls on the twine binding a tightly packed parcel of powdered hematite.

Memories swim in front of her eyes—Valery reclining against the cushions of Magdalene’s couch, eyes shimmering with empathetic tears as a nature documentary played on the flat screen; laying face-up on the balcony to watch the clouds while Valery read with her head propped on Magdalene’s stomach; throwing potting soil at each other in the yard while the radio blasted country music.

Screaming at each other over the phone while Ansel helped her gather the things Valery had left around the apartment; the look on Valery’s face when Magdalene gave her the box of her belongings and told her to get out; the way the plants hanging from the ceiling to dry had shook when the door slammed, Magdalene’s voice cracking as she yelled, “I hope you’re happy together” at the closed door.

She blinks down at the red powder and imagines the images of yesterday clinging to her eyelashes like Sandman’s glittering gold. Magdalene clears her throat. “It’s for me. No strangers involved.”

They both know that’s not the biggest problem with the situation. “The Council almost banned it a few years back! Not to mention the ethics—”

“Forget about the ethics. The Council didn’t follow through,” she argues. “Lover’s bane is still perfectly legal. Come on, you’re the most talented brewer I know. If anyone can get it right, you can.”

“Stop bullshitting me, there are *tons* of better brewers out there. There just aren’t any you could convince to help you. You can’t flatter me into helping you poison yourself, either.”

“I’m not bullshitting,” she promises. “But I need this, Ansel. If you won’t help me, I’ll find someone who will. You know just as well as I do that the good potion makers don’t want to ruin their businesses but there are plenty of sketchy people I could hire to brew it.”

The room is silent. Ansel’s arms are crossed over his chest.

“Please,” she says.

“You’re the biggest idiot I know,” Ansel says, dropping his arms. He rolls his eyes towards the ceiling like he expects to find answers written up there, or maybe patience. “And if I let you do this without me, you’ll definitely kill yourself. You owe me, big time.”

“I know,” Magdalene says. She tears into one of the parcels sitting on the desk. “Let’s get started.”

Draining the magic from a magical species shouldn’t be possible. Magic is a force of nature, wily and a bit unpredictable, but it has *rules*. It doesn’t like breaking them. Humans, greedy things they are, have found and used loopholes for centuries.

There are spells, old and grandiose and mostly forgotten now, for pulling the essence from creatures. There are amulets that boost magical energy when made with the right enchantments and materials. Sacrifices, when timed correctly, can give a ritual the extra *oomph* it needs to pull through. Magic can be pulled from things, stretched out and reshaped until it’s unrecognizable, but it’s difficult and time consuming. It doesn’t drain itself away from a host willingly.

Mages that work with plants should logically be more affected by laws of nature. There's a lot of slack to work with, but once you try to break a law—of nature or of magic—it holds fast and doesn't bend. It would make sense for the rules to be twice as strict when the two disciplines cross streams. Instead, the only documented occurrences of natural magical decay manifests itself in those who tend to otherworldly plants.

"We're curing soul rot today," she tells Ansel as they get to work, upending parcels of ingredients on the desk. Ansel's cauldron is already bubbling away on the carpeted floor, a fire hazard if Magdalene's ever seen one, but he insists that the energy in his room is better for brewing. Magdalene thinks he just doesn't want to go through the hassle of moving all his supplies to the kitchen.

"Soul rot," he deadpans, snapping the heads off a clump of foxglove. "You mean the unexplained magical phenomenon that can clear out entire greenhouses? The one that, despite a couple decades of research, no one knows jack shit about?"

"More or less."

There are a lot of theories on soul rot. Some people think that if a mage pays too much attention to the same plants for too long, the build-up of pure magic causes them to overload and die from the stress. Others believe it's a curse, not an affliction, and the only way to get rid of it is to wait until the spell runs out of energy and burns up. It's called soul rot because regardless of how it happens, a mage can always feel the magic fleeing. It's torture, watching the plants try to function without a necessary component to their survival.

The longest documented case of soul rot took just under two days to strip a nursery of every flower, tree, and bush in it. Many plants die within the first twelve hours, unable to regulate their systems without magic to sustain them. There's no cure, no treatment. The only thing a mage can do once soul rot sets in is resign themselves to starting from scratch.

Magdalene isn't a scientist, not by a long shot. But she *is* a plant mage, and a damn good one at that. She's got a hunch, and following a hunch is better than doing nothing while her garden is destroyed. Inaction gets you nowhere in nature.

"Okay, disregarding the fact that we don't know *anything* about this shit, how is lovers' bane supposed to help?"

"I have a theory," she says.

"A theory," Ansel repeats, rifling through his bookshelf and pulling down a thick tome. "Well thank God you're not rushing into something *extremely reckless* without a plan."

"Shut up, you already agreed to help me."

"I agreed to help, but I never said I wouldn't give you shit while I did."

Fair enough. Time to sink or swim.

"Just listen. When I was seven, this happened to my grandmother. She had this huge greenhouse, probably bigger than the actual house she lived in. She let me help tend to the plants she grew there so I could learn how to use my powers. But one day we went to water the plants and they were all dying."

"How long did it take for them all to die?"

"A day and a half. I remember seeing her run through the rows, looking for a plant that wasn't affected." Magdalene pauses, fiddling with a stalk of lavender. It's dead, but a faint hum emanates from it comfortingly "She didn't find any."

"Okay, so you've seen this in person before. I guess you have a point of comparison, but how does that help us?"

People always talk about soul rot as if it's this spontaneous thing. But Magdalene had always felt like she'd seen it coming in the days before it struck. She hadn't realized it at the time, but there had been something off about the plants, like they hadn't had as much energy as they usually did. As if they were lacking in magic, or weighed down by something.

"Right before this happened, my grandpa died. Like, a week before this. By the time the funeral was over, it felt like she had given up." Magdalene shivers. "It was scary, seeing her like that. She's always been a bit of a spitfire, you know?"

"But she was depressed after the death of her husband. You think it had to do with the fluctuation of magical energy?" Ansel looks thoughtful.

"Not quite. I think... I think her *emotions* killed them off."

"What?"

Magdalene sighs. She knows what she's about to say will set him off. "Look, before I noticed what was happening, I was thinking about Valery again."

Ansel's face softens with understanding. The frustration fades from his voice when he muses aloud, "I can't imagine you had anything good to say about her."

"The thoughts I was having... They weren't pretty. I know we've been over this, but I kept thinking that if I had been different—if I had been *better*, somehow, she would've stayed with me."

"Magdalene." Ansel puts his hands on her shoulders, potion components forgotten. He ducks down to make sure she's looking at him. "It's been *one day*. You need to cut yourself some slack."

She bites her lip. The lavender is crushed between her tensed hands.

“It’s not your fault that she couldn’t be faithful to you. There’s nothing *wrong* with you. Valery made her own choices, okay? They were shitty choices, but she decided to cheat all on her own.” Ansel flexes his fingers against her shoulders as if he’s considering shaking her to make sure his words sink in.

“But we were always fighting. If I hadn’t been—”

“Been what, Mags? A person? Someone with their own faults and needs and opinions?”

A pause. “I don’t know.” She ducks out from underneath Ansel’s arms and clears her throat again. “I don’t know. But that’s—yeah. You get the picture. When it happened to my grandmother, I thought it was a fluke or something. It didn’t feel like the explanation could be so simple, you know? If I could figure it out, why hadn’t someone else already done it?”

“So you think killing off your emotions is gonna save your garden? Mags, that’s... I mean.” Ansel pauses, considering. “It makes sense, kind of. But I can’t even begin to describe how dangerous this potion can be.”

“I know, I know, it’s very likely we’ll fuck it up and only slightly less likely that it’ll turn out poisonous, but I have to do this.”

“Magdalene, listen to me. Even if it works, there’s a chance that it’ll kill off your other feelings too. *All of them*. It’s not natural. You really want to risk it?”

She meets his eyes. “I don’t have another choice.”

She won’t survive having to restart her garden. It’d be painful for any plant mage; they give their lives to their plants when they tend to them with magic. Magdalene can’t feel their pain, but she can monitor their health from a short distance, and when she gets sick the plants suffer for it. If you tend to a garden long enough—if you *love* it enough—the shock of it dying can kill you.

All she's been doing since she found out Valery cheated on her is tend to her plants to escape her heartbreak. The bond between Magdalene and her garden is stronger than it's ever been. It's the only thing keeping her going right now, and Ansel knows it just as well as she does.

He sighs and drags his book of shady potions recipes out from underneath the bed. "This better work, or I'll kill you myself."

It takes them nearly eight hours to finish the brew.

Magdalene has to stop herself from checking on her garden every few minutes, partially because it hurts to see her plants in such a sorry state, but mostly because lovers' bane is a stupidly complex potion, and they risk screwing up if one of them takes their focus off it for even a moment.

Ansel is quiet as he works, finger skimming down the page of the potions book he'd retrieved earlier faster than Magdalene can follow. She wasn't lying when she said that he was the best potions maker she knew, but it's a complicated brew, even for him. He checks and double checks every instruction before carrying it out, fussing over Magdalene when she tries to add powdered horsetail and doing it himself.

For all his protest, this is his project now, so Magdalene sits quietly, anxiously beside him, handing him things he asks for and hoping they're on the right track.

Magdalene surveys her garden. Her heart squeezes as she notes the cracked stalks of the yellow cress, the rot blackening the twilight root, and the way the wormwood droops, listless. Some of the more magical plants, the fire lilies and the black saffron and the weeping poppy, have already died.

The potion is in her hand, bottled hastily and dripping down the side of the container. Magdalene raises it to her lips, hesitating. There's no going back if she takes this. They didn't have the time to do a test run, so if something went wrong with the potion, they're about to find out. Ansel stands nervously behind her, ready to intervene if necessary. She takes a short breath and downs the potion in one go like a shot.

Nothing happens for a heartbeat, then two, then three. Her garden looks the same—sickly, apparent to even the untrained eye, the sweet smell of rot hanging in the air. Magdalene's stomach swoops, but that could just as easily be nerves.

Then, all at once, her magic comes alive. It rises to the surface of her skin, so powerful she swears she can see it snaking out towards the plants in tendrils. There's more of it than usual. She feels like she's been supercharged. She touches the vine of ivy crawling across the railing, imagines taking a pinky's worth of magic from the well bubbling up inside of her, and gives it a gentle push.

Immediately, the ivy dies. Horrified, she snatches her hand away from the ivy, but it's too late. All around her, stalks shrivel and blossoms fall, petals scattering onto the balcony floor. Flowers curdle in their pots, tall grasses turning crisp and brown, mosses drying out and crumpling. The plants, gray and dead, crumble like wood burned to ash. A breeze tears across the balcony, sweeping them away and leaving their pots barren.

It's nauseating. Guilt wells up in her, pushing at her ribs like water desperate to escape a dam. Before she can do anything more than realize, abruptly and heart-wrenchingly, what she's done, the soil in the pot closest to her shifts. A pale green sprout pushes through the soil, seed cap falling from its leaves as they unfurl. It stretches skyward, multiple shoots breaking through the dirt to join it.

A breath is ripped from her lungs. It feels as though a weight she hadn't noticed has been lifted from them, and now she's surprised at how easily she can breathe. It's the absence of heartbreak, she notes dimly, more than the absence of dread.

Across the balcony, new sprouts grow rapidly. When she reaches for the nearby pot of hellebores, magic tickles at her fingertips. The garden sings around her, *I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive.*

Blight

One

The Vaughn-Greer vineyard sits on 45 acres of land, tucked into the hills of the Finger Lakes like an old family secret. It stretches over the hills, rolling gently with the lift of the land, vines as far as the eye can see. Late afternoon sunlight beats down like a drum, forcing the shadows to flee their hiding spots among the branches and brambles.

It's innocuous and stifling in summer's favorite fashion, smothered in sun and sweat, anticipation steeping in the air like steam curling off a cup of tea. Ripeness hangs warmly in the air, stirred by the wind and carried out to the road on its shoulders. It lodges in his throat like a peach pit, pithy like dread and impossible to move.

Chester leans against the door of the car. July has turned the world sticky and indistinct through the heat that shimmers off of the asphalt, the shingled roof of the winery, and the burning metal of the vehicle at his back. High above the parking lot, a hawk glides through the distorted patches of his vision before disappearing into the trees. Sweat beads in the crooks of his elbows and turns the back of his neck tacky under the collar of his shirt.

Norah draws his attention away by slamming the car door. They lean against the side of the car, seemingly unbothered when their bare legs press up against its heated exterior. They roll the sleeves of their new white t-shirt over their knobby shoulders, letting out a displeased hum that reminds Chester of a swarm of angry bees. Fair, considering he'd locked them in the car until they agreed to replace their eye-searing orange tube top with something that's still out of place next to Chester's business casual attire but at least doesn't leave him blinking spots out of his eyes.

Not for the first time, Chester regrets choosing a career with a strict dress code. He'd swap his shined black shoes for a pair of worn-out hiking boots in a heartbeat if he could. He can already feel the blisters he's bound to have by the end of the day.

Norah makes a show out of glaring at him while they shove the hem of their shirt into their khaki shorts. He refrains from commenting because he knows neither the price of his suit nor the fact that they're both working will stop his sibling from introducing the steel toe of their boot to his shin. The Vaughn-Greers could come by at any moment and he can't afford to lose any confidence they may or may not have in him by getting into petty scuffles.

Besides, he's already running Norah's patience dangerously thin by bringing them here at the government's behest. It wasn't the desperate request from Chester's superior that convinced Norah to overlook their extreme reluctance to take a government job—that honor belongs to the unsettled phone call he placed this morning, one that was met with vicious swearing but ultimately drew them upstate.

Their expertise is well worth the ruffled feathers he'll inevitably have to smooth over due to Norah's open distaste for just about everybody and general inability to discuss anything other than science with a lick of competency.

Delightful, that. Beggars can't be choosers, but Chester skipped begging and went straight to blackmail so he feels justified in wishing Norah would use that big brain of theirs to read the room every once in a while.

(Is it immoral to blackmail your sibling if they owe you more favors than you can count? It probably doesn't matter; he gave up his claim to morality when he took a job in an office known for covering things up when it's convenient, which seems to be always.)

Norah hefts a canvas bag from the backseat. It's the size of their torso, unwieldy and straining towards the ground under gravity's deft pull. Despite how heavy it looks, they sling it comfortably over one shoulder, unconcerned with the bulky equipment. They grab the handle of their suitcase next and thrust it into Chester's arms, smirking at the quiet wheeze forced out of him by the hard edge meeting his stomach.

"You get to be my pack mule," they declare, watching him fumble to get a good grip with visible disdain. He ends up on one knee before he finally finds the handle and the scattered remains of his dignity. "What, your cushy government job keeps you from hitting the gym once in a while?"

"Pretty sure you spend more time sitting around than I do."

Norah's job is mostly writing and rewriting research papers interspersed with crunching numbers and staring at plants. There's also a lot of complaining about their department's lack of funding. So much complaining.

Chester spends all his time poking his nose into other people's business. It involves quite a bit of legwork and a perfectly normal amount of time in the office, thank you very much. In the privacy of his own mind, he's capable of accepting that the only thing his six extra years of life has given him is a propensity for migraines and chronic back pain, but no one else needs to know that. He and Norah are both aware of this and that's as close as Chester ever needs to get to calling himself old. He's not even thirty, damn it.

"You'd never know it based on the size of your ass." Norah dodges the swat he throws at them, snickering when he loses his grip on the suitcase again. "Hey! All I'm saying is that when you gain weight it goes right to your cheeks, and I'm not talking about your face."

“So I gathered,” he grumbles. The temptation to let the suitcase fall to the ground just to be done with it is strong, but he wrestles it down. Investigation first, sibling squabble later. “You’re insufferable.”

“And yet here you are, suffering.”

“Oh my God, shut up. Come on, walk and talk.”

As it turns out, Chester doesn’t get more than two sentences into his explanation before they’re interrupted.

Mr. Vaughn is a genial man with a sharklike smile. He meets them at the entrance of the winery, looking unbothered by the heat in his navy suit. He shakes Chester’s hand with a firm grip. “I take it that this is the consultant you requested?”

“A specialist in botanical theory of magic,” Chester confirms.

“The best in the country.” Norah adds, more than a little smug.

“Charmed,” Mr. Vaughn says. He eyes Norah uncertainly, clearly trying to decide how to address them. The confusion is the most genuine emotion Chester’s seen from him so far. “We’ll be in your hands, Miss...?”

“Dr. Deering, if you please.” Norah supplies. The severe expression on their face makes it clear that they won’t take kindly to being called ‘Miss’ again.

“Another of your flock, I take it?” Mr. Vaughn looks to Chester as if he could pull an explanation out of him with his eyes alone.

Chester brushes off the reference to their sister, hoping Mr. Vaughn won't mention Estelle by name. He clears his throat. "We're siblings, sir. I was just taking Dr. Deering to the conference room before we head out to the vineyard. Did you happen to find the maps I asked for?"

The older man gestures for them to follow him and turns to lead them into the winery. He coughs awkwardly before speaking. "My wife brought them up. You'll have to contact her if you have any questions. I'm afraid that she's much more versed in this sort of thing than I am."

Upon arrival, Chester dumps Norah's suitcase into the corner of the room. They scoff at him and set their duffle bag on one end of the long table with considerably more control over its descent. Mr. Vaughn looks relieved to take his leave while Chester examines the maps laid out on the table. Most of them are regional maps detailing weather patterns, altitude, and temperature. Someone's taken a marker to a layout of the grounds, a general outline of the spell inked in like a void.

The amount of land under the spell's effect is startlingly large. It's vaguely centered on what Chester's been told is an abandoned building that served as the winery before the Vaughn-Greers built a bigger and better facility towards the front of the property. Everything within a three-mile radius is dead; not just the vines, but the grass and any flowers and weeds that managed to grow between the aisles.

The most progress they've made so far is determining the extent of the damage. Even Estelle hadn't been of much help. She managed to rule out more curses than Chester had known existed but couldn't come up with anything that looks like the fast-acting decay that's sweeping over the vineyard.

He has no idea where to go from here. He doesn't even know what kind of equipment they should keep on hand. His boss made sure to impress upon him how *unfortunate* it would be if the Vaughn-Greers couldn't recover from this. If Norah can't figure it out, they're well and truly boned. Chester tells them as much as they leave the winery and head towards the vineyard.

“What do you feel?” He asks. A worker passing by agrees to drive them out to meet up with the others when Chester stops him.

Norah frowns at him while they wait for the worker to return with a cart. “Is this therapy now?” His unimpressed look makes them sigh and scuff their shoe on the ground. “You haven’t exactly told me what to look for. For once, you’ve got a better idea of what’s going on here than me.”

Chester rolls his eyes. “You tell me,” he says. “I want to get your impression before I poison the well.”

This seems to appease them. When in doubt, cite the scientific method.

A thoughtful look steals across Norah’s face. It persists through the first few minutes of their drive, which are blissfully void of their usual instigation. Norah’s eyes are closed in concentration when they speak again. “I’ve been on a train for eight hours. I don’t know if I can focus...” Their brows furrow as their voice trails off, the last of the contrariness fading from their tone. “It’s like—being in a really big room, but it’s completely silent.”

This lines up with his intel, though it’s a given that what Chester registers as silence qualifies as a torrent of sound to Norah. He has many skills, but sensing magic isn’t one of them. It’s been as useful as it’s been detrimental, honestly. He gets a lot of flak for it at the office but at least he doesn’t have to deal with spells buzzing in his ears all the time. Supernatural tinnitus is something he can live without.

“What else?” He prompts, closing his own eyes. There’s nothing beyond the faint hollowness that follows him most days. It thrives under his attention, taking root in his gut as soon as he spares it a thought. Chester lifts his lids, refocusing on the present. Norah is watching him carefully.

They tilt their head towards the floor of the cart, heave out a breath that holds the weight of worlds, and expand their focus beyond the immediate area. Casting a line, they call it, tossing a point of

focus into the distance and hoping something will bite. When magic latches onto the line, Norah gets a vague sense of the spell. Sifting out the relevant details takes some doing but they can usually read the intention of the spell.

Chester can't do magic, but he knows how it works. He understands casting spells in the same abstract way he understands that he will never speak another language as intuitively as he does English; he knows the individual words, but the nuances are lost on him, the turn of phrase incomprehensible, repetition necessary where others understand immediately.

Generally, Chester isn't the best person to be pulling the strings on this kind of investigation—God only knows that he'd love to hand the reins over to someone who can actually feel what's going on firsthand—but he's the most practical choice. He's got plenty of experience with being the only sober person at the party, only this time the party is a potentially deadly, out of control spell and the drunk people are being roofied by a bunch of air currents he's immune to and his boss is breathing down the back of his neck every five seconds wondering why he hasn't pulled a solution out of his ass yet.

Maybe he'd be closer to a solution by now if there wasn't so much red tape between him and any meaningful progress.

The number one source of red tape in today's investigation brushes the hair out of their eyes, flummoxed and wavering in their seat. Chester steadies them with a hand on their shoulder. Medical tape does not need to be added to this scenario; things are sticky enough as it is.

"It's buzzy..." Their expression has gone vague, a muscle at the corner of their mouth jumping like it can't decide what to do with itself.

Norah's particularly in tune with plant matter. So much so that it was surprisingly easy to get them clearance to consult on the investigation even though they've never been contracted with the

government before. When you spend half of your life studying something, it's a given that you'll become an expert.

Something big must bite at the end of their line, because their body jerks and the contents of their bag clank ominously. They grab his wrist. Startled, he balks in their grasp. Norah's eyes, brown as gleaming, snap up to meet Chester's. He's reminded of the last month that Norah wrote their dissertation, when they were getting a couple hours of sleep here and there before restlessness sent them back to work, spilling coffee on the table every time they tried to drink because there had been a baseline of 500 milligrams of caffeine in them every day.

They look, quite suddenly, exhausted. Exhausted and ready to launch themselves into a ten-hour work binge.

"There's a hole," they say, voice low and urgent. Their grip on his wrist tightens until he's sure to have bruises. "Right in the middle of the field, there's a fucking hole. Chester, what did these people *do*?"

Beating back his desire to call this entire day off and send them back home to rest, Chester puts his other hand on top of the one Norah has clamped around his arm. They let go immediately, jolting as if forcing themselves not to back away. "We're not sure *they* did anything. According to the family, the crops started dying overnight and they want us to figure out how to prevent them from taking a total loss."

"*Total loss*," Norah repeats, disdain dripping from the words. "Of course that's what they're worried about right now. Nevermind the fact that this thing is dangerous. Fucking rich people."

Disturbed, they resettle the canvas bag on their lap. He'll have to hope that the Vaughn-Greers' misplaced priorities won't set Norah on the warpath. Their profits can tank for all Chester cares, but he's been in the game too long to have any delusions about where this is going.

Norah studies his face. "And you don't sense anything?" They ask for confirmation of a fact they both know. Testing against known variables is important when conducting experiments, and Norah cares too much about getting results to worry about being insensitive.

A smile, wry and self-depreciating. "I never do."

The worker kicks them out of the cart once they get close enough to feel the worst of the spell's effects. He shudders as they get off, telling them in no uncertain terms that he won't be sticking around to take them back.

Norah makes a noise of discomfort when their feet touch the ground. They wave Chester off when he tries to take the canvas bag from them, shouldering past him when he insists.

Even without a guide, finding their way is easy. All they have to do is do the opposite of what Norah's instincts tell them and go towards the intense mass of doom and gloom pressing down on them. If they feel sicker, they know they're on the right track.

"It's caging us in." Norah mutters. They're clutching the strap of their bag with both hands, worrying it between their palms.

Chester says nothing. He follows two steps behind his sibling as they lead him deeper into the vines.

After ten minutes of walking the edge of the spell comes into view. Estelle, armed with a can of spray paints and a bad attitude, is all but attacking the ground. She wields the spray paint with the intensity of someone unafraid to mace anyone that doesn't take the hint the first time around.

He's seen her do it. It looked like she enjoyed it.

Norah bristles at the sight of her.

"What is *she* doing here?" They demand, staring at Chester with murder in their eyes. Their arm swings out to point at Estelle, as if he needs the emphasis to properly appreciate their ire.

Estelle, spray paint in hand, stands to greet them. The dead grass crunches softly beneath her feet. She steps over the wet paint neatly separating the living from the dead, face schooled into the bland expression she used to wear to confront their father. Behind her, dead vines stretch towards the sun like broken fingers. They rustle dryly in the slight breeze.

"She's measuring how fast the spell is spreading." Chester replies, aware that that's not the answer they want.

"You didn't say she'd be here too!" Norah's voice grows in volume, tension building in the air. "What, was I your second choice?"

As if something like being the first choice is important when there's a job for them to be done. His patience is well-worn, but it creaks under the weight of both siblings at once.

Chester massages his temples. "I asked her to take a look because you weren't here and wouldn't be for another couple hours. She decided to stay and help even though this isn't exactly her area of expertise."

When they still lived together, when the slant of Estelle's mouth was carefully neutral more than it was ever happy, she managed to kill every house plant she touched. It's like the plants sensed her nearby and decided to put themselves out of their misery before her best intentions could drag them into the grave. These grapevines can't get any deader, so it's probably safe for her to hang around inside the spell zone.

Probably. There's no accounting for what will happen now that she and Norah are face-to-face.

"I'm surprised she bothered to show up," Norah snipes, arms crossed tightly over their chest.

Estelle's blankness falters for the span of a breath. "Well, I wouldn't want something as *petty* as a grudge to interfere with such a serious investigation," she simpers. It's the same tone people have been taking with Norah since they entered high school at 12 years old, all of 90 pounds with their over-full backpack firmly on their shoulders.

Powder, meet fuse. Boom.

God, what a shitshow.

Two

The resulting blowout lasts until Chester inserts himself between them, icily reminding them that they have a very real problem that requires their attention, so if they could table their insults for when they've created a stopgap for the *raging death spell*, that would be *great*, thanks.

Sufficiently cowed, Norah follows him deeper into the vineyard, leaving Estelle behind with her spray paint. She can hear Chester warning Norah that the paint is wet as they walk down the aisle, stepping over the concentric circles Estelle's been tasked with making every half hour. Rankled by the short argument, Estelle ignores the growing ache in her spine and gets back to work.

The standard containments spells were completely ineffective. When she tried using the method that she developed with her coworkers, it didn't even slow the spell down. Estelle cast every containment, protection, and shielding spell she could think of, and nothing happened. The grass is still withering under her feet, the grapes are drying out and shrinking in front of her eyes, and the team's no closer to knowing what's happening than they were at five this morning.

She's starting to doubt that they're going to be able to do anything to help; the property damage alone would be monumental. Estelle doesn't even want to think about how the public would react if the truth got out. There would be more than one unnecessary death. Estelle doesn't need Chester to tell her that they can't let this thing take on a life of its own.

It's not like she *planned* to argue with Norah as soon as she saw them. By virtue of being a younger sibling, Norah possesses the innate ability to get under Estelle's skin with a single sentence. She's thirty-four years old. She should have better control over herself than this, but Norah is so effortlessly infuriating that they make Estelle feel all of sixteen, arguing over what to make for dinner.

After being away for the better part of a decade, her tolerance for Norah's abrasive personality has waned. (After being away for the better part of a decade, she still isn't used to the hostility that decorates every interaction they have.)

In the face of this much destruction, the feud between them seems childish and unimportant. She knows that. It's bad enough that Chester's been forced to play mediator for them every time Estelle is back in the country. Squabbling with Norah while he's on the job is a poor way to thank him for not taking Norah's side when he has more than enough reason to.

She left them both behind when she turned twenty-one, but Chester has always been the most forgiving one in the family. It's probably in everyone's best interest for Estelle to make herself scarce when possible. She's thorough and competent, but she's not the one the team *needs* to move forward.

Hopefully, Norah will still be willing to help. She's not afraid to call her younger sibling selfish—or hot-headed, or stubborn as all hell—but she knows that Norah would say the same about her, so who's to say what the truth is? She's more familiar with Norah's tantrums than anything else; their short temper is one of the only things that hasn't changed since Estelle last lived with them.

There's a very real possibility that Norah will refuse to cooperate until Chester bribes or threatens them into behaving. It's happened before. Every time Chester tries to get the three of them together, Norah shuts it down before he can so much as tell them where they're going. As soon as Estelle's name leaves his mouth, all bets are off. Tricking Norah into showing up and springing Estelle's presence on them is something he only tried once before on account of how quickly things escalated when they realized what was going on. Estelle didn't help matters by being snide, but honestly, she was just tired of things blowing up in her face.

They were never going to be a picture-perfect family. Estelle thought her siblings realized that once they figured out that their father didn't marry their mother for love.

All she can do is hope for the best. Chester is always telling her that she should give Norah more credit. Maybe she should finally listen to her brother's advice.

Estelle's day goes from bad to worse when she finds the dead hawk. She doesn't appreciate the extra 'fuck you' from the universe.

She's seen plenty of dead things before. It comes with the territory, and Estelle will take a dead bird over a person's corpse any day. That doesn't make it any more pleasant on the eyes. Or any of the senses, really.

Washing out the smell of rot takes days. Sometimes it's better to give up before you start and burn it out instead.

It must not have been dead long, because she doesn't remember seeing it on any of her previous rounds. Less than half an hour ago, it was alive, probably hunting for whatever it is that hawks eat. Squirrels? This thing looks big enough to snatch up a rabbit, no problem.

She unclips the walkie talkie from her waistband, hesitating. No blood. No indication of what killed it—Estelle's picked up a lot of useful knowledge in her travels, speculating on cause of death included, but she's never put the skill to practice on a bird. A bear, once. A few pet dogs that had gone missing and hadn't come back alive.

Many, many human bodies.

This corpse is tangled in the rasping vines hanging from the posts that shape the vineyard into aisles, one wing bent awkwardly underneath it, like it dropped out of the sky mid-flight. It's uncomfortable to look at, but not sad. Estelle saves her sadness for the days she's sent to notify families that their loved ones aren't coming back.

At least there's a body here. It's probably unrelated—they're investigating dead plants, not animals. Experience has taught her that manipulating bonds is hard enough when you're only working with one subject class. Most people can't balance a spell with more than one target or purpose. She doesn't know the science behind it, but the math doesn't work out.

Still, she can't shake the thought that there might be more to this than expected. If it gets her off of her current job, she's more than happy to run down a dead end. The smell of spray paint is starting to give her a headache despite the breeze.

She radios her brother's assistant, who's been directing the investigation from the middle of the field while they waited for Chester to return. Annalise's grim silence crackles across the line like lightning. Estelle's dread catches onto it and tightens its grip. The other woman must be having the same doubts on the other end.

The decay's picked up traction all day. If it's speeding up, it's feeding on something. It shouldn't be possible for magic that targets vegetation to become omnivorous, curse or not. Tavern's Law of Magic is concrete; magic degrades over time. It can't sustain itself. It can't mutate. Attempting to recharge a spell is liable to blow up in the caster's face in more than one way.

She saw it happen for the first time when she was barely 22. Her supervisor held her hair back while she threw up in the bushes, then taught her how to wash blood out of her clothes. They still had to burn the jacket Estelle wore that day.

"Ask Norah what they know about Tavern's Law," Estelle suggests. She squats next to the bird's broken body and unknots the bandana holding her hair back. It springs forward in a frizzy cloud, sticking to the underside of her chin as she wraps the cloth around sharp talons and stiff feet. There's probably a more sanitary way to do this, but Chester inherited all the patience in the family and a good deal of the common sense. "They're a brat, but they know their shit."

She hears Norah yell something disparaging in the background. Annalise cuts it off with a sigh.
“And what are you going to do?”

“I’m gonna call a vet, see if they can tell me if this thing died from natural causes. If you come take over tracking for me, I’ll bring it back to the winery and they can meet me there.”

“You’ve already picked it up, haven’t you?” Chester’s voice comes through the speaker a little despairingly.

Estelle straightens up, holding the bandana-wrapped hawk by the legs like the world’s saddest piñata. “Don’t ask questions you already know the answer to. I’ll hit you back when I’ve got news.”

She gets more than a few stares as she makes her way back to the winery. The driver of the cart she tries to flag down shoots the hawk a disgusted look and keeps driving.

Estelle can’t blame them. She doesn’t want it near her either.

Walking takes longer, but not long enough for the vet to have already arrived. She doesn’t want to bring a dead animal into a building where they make food—she has a feeling the Vaughn-Greers wouldn’t forgive her for that, investigation be damned. For lack of a better place to wait she sets it gingerly on the grass near the front door.

As she straightens up, the door clatters open. Three teenagers spill outside, stumbling over their feet when the one in front pulls up short with a gasp. The one in the back almost knocks his hat off as he reaches around the head of tight curls in front of him to grab his friend by the back of his shirt before he ends up on the ground. The girl with the curly hair ducks around her friends to avoid a collision.

“Is it... dead?” The question comes from the boy who almost fell, prompting the other boy to let go of his shirt. Brown hair hangs in a shaggy curtain over one eye and over his ears, inching towards his chin.

“Dude, does that thing *look* alive to you?” The boy with the hat scoffs, tugging on the rim of his hat. The furtive glances he sends the hawk betrays his cavalier attitude.

“You’re one of those investigators,” the girl says, bright curiosity undeterred by the carcass on the grass. The boy with the hat suddenly looks interested. The other just looks queasy.

The last time Estelle has regular contact with a kid was before she left home to go east, when Norah was 12 and Chester was barely a legal adult. When she came back, her kid brother wasn’t a kid anymore, and her youngest sibling wouldn’t stay in the same room as her longer than it took to give her a dirty look. In some respects, the shouting is an improvement.

“Uh, yeah.” Should she make them stop looking? It’s not like they can unsee it. “I’m Estelle,” she offers.

The teens take this as permission to crowd around her and ask all sorts of questions about how the investigation is going and what the others are up to out in the vineyard. The one with the hat drops onto the grass next to her while the girl drags the other boy around to sit across from them.

She has no idea how to make them leave. She can’t actually tell them about the investigation—partially because they’ve made virtually no progress but mostly because Chester would kill her if he found out. Making them introduce themselves is only going to encourage them to stick around and badger her more, but it’s not like there’s anything else to do while she waits for the vet to come relieve her of her late charge.

She moves it further away from where they sit, because she's a responsible adult and she's pretty sure that if anyone came across them chatting it up next to a recently deceased hawk, they'd freak out.

The boy who almost tripped in the doorway is Mr. Vaughn's son, Vincent. He introduces himself with a conflicted grimace, like he's not sure he wants to include his last name but feels like he should. The girl's name is Miriam and cheerfully reveals that she's the daughter of Mrs. Greer.

"You're step-siblings, then?" Estelle gestures between the two.

They glance at each other. The last teen, James, shakes his head. He shifts uncomfortably, ripping up handfuls of grass.

Miriam shrugs. Her smile is fixed to her face, a plastic half-moon of a thing. "They thought putting our family names together would make their business more successful."

"It worked," Vincent says bitterly.

Not family, then. They could be friends. There doesn't seem to be any bad blood between the two of them, and kids aren't good at hiding that kind of thing. (Neither are adults, usually. Estelle's a prime example of that.) Having your parents marry each other for a business deal is awkward but it's probably easy to bond over it. It's not like there's that many people who'd understand that kind of situation, so their options are pretty limited.

Estelle casts around for something to change the subject with. Whatever repressed emotions these kids have—and she's sure there's many—she doesn't want to get involved. If they start telling her their life stories, she's going to pick up her bird and lock herself in the conference room until the vet arrives, sanitation issues or not.

James takes pity on her, or maybe on himself. "So, what's up with the bird?"

Miriam brightens again. Estelle is mildly disturbed by how unphased she is. How old is she, fifteen? Vincent gives it an appropriately revolted look, at least. Despite drawing attention to it again, James keeps his eyes firmly away from the heap of feathers.

“It’s a hawk. I, uh, found it in the vineyard.” Talking to teenagers is so awkward, God help her. They’re basically small adults, right? Small adults with voices that haven’t finished breaking and baby fat clinging to their cheeks. Christ.

“So you decided to take it?” Vincent asks. Disgust and disbelief war for dominance on his face. “Why?”

“That’s classified.” Estelle says before she can think better of it. It’s true, and she doesn’t want to tell them that she thinks something killed it, but it’s only going to invite more questions.

“It’s classified,” Miriam repeats. Estelle nods. “Your *bird carcass*.”

“Very,” Estelle confirms. “You seem very unbothered by the whole ‘dead animal’ thing.”

“Mr. Vaughn takes me hunting.” Waving off her concerns, Miriam leans in closer, like she can get more information from Estelle’s words if she comes close enough. “Why are *you* so comfortable with it?”

“I’m a curse breaker.”

I’ve seen a lot of it, she doesn’t say. If she does, they’ll have even more questions, ones Estelle wouldn’t answer even if she knew how to.

A car turns off the road and parks in front of the winery. Estelle points to it as the man inside throws open his door, relieved to redirect their attention. “I think this is the guy I’ve been waiting for. I’m sure you were on your way to do something before you saw me, so I’ll let you get back to it.”

It's a dismissal, and the teens seem to know it. Miriam levers herself off the grass reluctantly, loitering even after the boys have taken a couple steps away.

Estelle sighs. "This really isn't something kids should be listening in on. Besides, I'm sure I'll be here for long enough that we'll run into each other again." She has a feeling that she's going to be spending a lot of time running back and forth from the conference room to the vineyard. Her feet hurt just thinking about it.

"I'll hold you to that." Miriam's smile reappears, slightly dampened but still cheerful. "If you're a curse breaker, you've gotta have a ton of cool stories."

With a promise to tell the three of them about some of her less gruesome cases later, she finally convinces the teens leave. A small groan of relief escapes her throat as she steps away from the winery to greet the vet.

It's time to get this show on the road.

Don't Drink the Water

It wasn't often that the fae came to call. When they did, it was to make trouble.

I didn't bother to cover the yawn that worked its way out of my mouth. It was far too early for any self-respecting fourteen-year-old to be awake, let alone doing chores, but Tara was adamant that we needed more fruit in our diets. Dad listened to her without question most times; she'd been his apprentice for more than two years now and had yet to let him down.

The fruit vendor kept a watchful eye on us as Hal poked around with way more intensity than was necessary for buying fruit. I was sure the vendor was staring us down because, thanks to a recent growth spurt, both of us were gangly and slightly uncoordinated. Though we were supposed to be identical, most people could tell us apart fine. With my messy hair and wrinkled clothes, I usually looked like I'd just rolled out of bed. Hal cared a bit more about his appearance, but he always looked like he'd just set a bucket of water on top of a door and was waiting for some poor sucker to upend it. When people saw me, they didn't immediately get the urge to check that they still had their wallets. Sometimes strangers actually patted their pockets apprehensively when Hal walked by. On the rare occasions that Hal left the house looking scruffy, someone might mess up and call him 'Hudson,' but I hadn't been called 'Hal' since we were nine.

I blocked out his complaints about certain apprentices poking her nose in his business, because I'd been listening to him whine since we learned how to talk, and he hadn't shut up since. He was unusually grumpy; he wasn't a morning person, but he liked acting as if he was in charge, so our early-morning errands usually began with him rolling me out of bed and fleeing the room before I could retaliate. He liked to sleep as much as I did, but he was far more willing to give it up if it meant he could boss people around—or if it gave him the opportunity to be contrary. There was no way we were making it through the trip without Hal enacting some contrived form of 'revenge' against Tara.

He seemed like he was going to be a while—deciding which fruits said ‘buzz off’ the loudest appeared to be taking longer than he anticipated—so I wandered to the baker’s stall next door to peek at their breakfast selection. I’d just decided to get one of the massive cherry tarts for us to split when I suddenly became aware of someone standing quietly at my elbow. I turned, about to tell Hal off for sneaking up on me, but the words died in my mouth.

I looked up at the stranger—and up, and up. The man must’ve been the tallest person I’d ever seen, even taller than Dad, who was no pixie. His hair was long and strangely dark, as if light was absorbed by it instead of reflecting off it.

“Can I... help you?” I asked, distracted by the stranger’s very sharp features. Did it hurt to have such a pinched face? It must have.

The man smiled. There was nothing particularly menacing about it (no sharpened teeth or threatening sneer, at least) but it put me on edge. His eyes were colorless, fixed on my face with far too much intent. There were, I realized, pointed ears peeking out of the man’s—the fae’s—hair. He didn’t bother saying anything, just smiled that off-putting smile and let the moment stretch on.

Glancing back at the counter, I saw that the baker and her wife had gone further into their stall, out of sight. Abandoned once again in my time of need. I’d have to deal with this on my own, then. “I should probably get back to my brother,” I said. It was a weak excuse, but I was painfully aware that the fae was standing between me and the road. The idea that he might bodily prevent me from leaving had just occurred to me, and it was justifiably distracting.

He didn’t appear to be in any hurry to let me go. His eyes tracked my hands fidgeting at my sides and the uncertain way I shifted my weight from foot to foot. Clearly, I was being evaluated—for what, I had no idea. I had the feeling that this was a test with far-reaching consequences. The real question was whether failing or passing was the better option.

Before I could do something stupid, like blurt out this observation, Hal stepped under the striped awning of the baker's stall. That was one problem solved, then; unfortunately, it immediately forced me to re-evaluate the situation. My worst fear was no longer me putting my foot in my mouth, it was Hal failing to realize that we were currently flirting with death, and death was *very* interested.

"Twins," the fae said, breaking his silence. He looked at Hal in a way that set my hair on end. His smile turned sharp and amused. Instead of simply evaluating, he looked as if he'd love nothing more than to do whatever creepy and unsettling things fae liked to do to kids when their parents weren't around. The predatory look lessened when he turned to look back at me, but it wasn't reassuring in the slightest.

Hal evidently felt as put off by that as I did, because he was getting the same disgruntled look on his face he got when Tara called one of us 'kid.' I stepped on his foot before he could say something sarcastic and give the fae a reason to go from observing to acting. Not that he strictly needed one.

"They're auspicious, you know," said the fae—casually, as if he couldn't snap the bones in my arm in half just by thinking about it too hard. As if he didn't know that neither of us had any idea whether he would; the fae didn't care much for moderation. It wasn't up to them to play nice. That was the humans' job as the weaker party, something I wished I was less viscerally aware of at that moment.

"So we've been told." Hal squinted up at the fae's face.

Neither of us put much stock in the supposed auspicious nature of twins, despite how many times we'd been told it was true. The neighbors liked to borrow us sometimes to sit in on their more complicated spells, especially around our birthday. We'd yet to see anything miraculous happen while harnessing that luck, but maybe the fact that neither of us accidentally set the forge on fire during one of our (many, largely pointless) squabbles was lucky enough. Mostly, we just suspected it was a load of bull.

The fae's smile grew, pulling up sharply at the edges. There was a glint of humor in his eyes that dragged a shiver up my spine. The sense of alarm screaming in my head urged me to grab Hal's arm and run, rules about not offending fae be damned. We both knew the only thing worse than an angry fae was an interested one.

He raised his hand, and I took an instinctive step back before I realized the gesture was directed at my brother, not me. A piece of white cardstock was tucked between his pointer and middle fingers. He offered it to Hal.

Hal studied the paper, then the fae. I thought about stepping forward and intervening. I thought about tapping out and letting this happen. What I really wanted was for the baker or her wife to step back up to the counter and shoo us away for not buying anything already, or for someone to queue up behind us and scare off the fae. Before anyone could miraculously interrupt this train wreck in slow motion, Hal seemed to come to some sort of conclusion, because he rummaged around in the bag at his side and produced a palm-sized fruit. "Pear?"

The fae's lip quirked at the non-sequitur—just how wide could he smile? It was a bit horrifying to watch his mouth stretch that much—and he took the fruit. He left the card in Hal's palm. "I expect I'll be seeing you soon," he said.

"Sure," Hal said good-naturedly. I couldn't tell whether he was serious or just trying to end the conversation with as little conflict as possible. Either way I had to fight the urge to rip the card out of his hand and demand that the fae take it back.

Once the fae disappeared down the road leading away from the market, I turned to Hal. "You are so *monumentally* stupid."

We bickered the whole way home.

It wasn't unusual for us to fight. Our room was the bigger of the two bedrooms in our house, but it was too small to hold both us and our personalities. Hal liked to needle. He was happiest when he was getting on my nerves. I had trouble keeping a hold of my temper because Hal knew exactly where my buttons were and delighted in pressing them.

"You know what Dad told us about taking things from fae," I groaned.

"It's dangerous, it's stupid, and if he caught us doing it, he'd ground us until we're old enough to have kids that'll ignore the rules that *we* make for *them*. Am I missing anything?"

"No, but I think you're glossing over the fact that being in debt to fae invites them to mess around with our lives!" Hal let me go on for a couple minutes, making vague noises of acknowledgement as I chewed him out. It made yelling at him much less satisfying, and I found myself running out of words sooner than I expected.

"Are you done now?" He rolled his eyes, which reignited my desire to throttle him.

"Yes," I admitted. I wasn't happy about it, because he went and invited the fae to check back up on us, but it wasn't like there was anything we could do about it now. "I'm still mad, though."

"When aren't you? Are you capable of listening to me now, or should I wait until the steam has stopped coming out of your ears?"

Though he said it sarcastically, the question was genuine. I motioned for him to continue, crossing my arms and doing my best to look as judgemental as possible—it didn't faze him, which was unfortunate because the haughty look on his face was super annoying. I had to appreciate the distinction, though; he knew that the fae were a whole other league. Hal dragged me into doing stupid

stuff with him all the time, and most of it broke at least three rules and had a sixty percent chance of backfiring, but he wasn't usually *reckless*.

"I know you're smart enough to put this together on your own, but since your head is firmly up your ass this morning, I'll help you out. You can't be in debt from an *exchange*."

I spluttered. "You think giving him a piece of fruit is enough to make him leave us alone? You have *no idea* what the fae consider an equivalent exchange, Hal!"

Fae didn't have the same standards as humans for anything. How could they? They used magic like they'd die if they went longer than an hour without it—and who knew, maybe they would—in measures bigger than most humans could sustain. Their social rules were similarly unmapped; those who got entangled with fae society tended not to come back, and if they did, they were in no shape to tell anyone anything of substance.

They were dangerous, and everyone knew it. If they had morals, no one knew what they were.

"I would usually agree with you, but he gave me a blank piece of paper. Pretty sure a pear is more valuable in this situation."

"What?" Caught up in thoughts of what could happen should the fae make a second appearance, I hadn't thought to ask what the card said. "*Seriously?* Then what was the point of giving it to you in the first place?!"

It was Hal's turn to groan. "To make us paranoid. They like stuff like that, don't they? Want us to be looking over our shoulders for the next couple weeks. You're killing me today, Hudson. Are you still asleep? Is that your problem?"

"Shut *up*, I swear I'm gonna strangle you."

The resulting scuffle lasted about two minutes. It ended when Hal dropped his bag on my foot, sending fruit rolling across the pebble-strewn road. We both swore, and I let Hal out of a headlock so that we could scramble around picking them up.

“Nice going,” Hal said. “They’re going to be bruised, now.”

“You dropped them!” I brushed the dirt off the last escaped fruit and returned it to Hal’s bag, then dug around for a second, incensed. “Did you really only buy pears?”

“Don’t you worry about it.”

“‘Don’t worry about it,’ there’s like thirty of these things!”

“Over-exaggerating, as usual. I only bought two dozen.”

“Oh, excuse me, being off by six is much more important than you being an idiot. My bad.”

“It was this or change my diet to consist only of fruit for the next few days. I think I made the better choice, all things considered.” He said this as if either of those options even remotely made sense.

“You could have, I don’t know, done neither of those things? How is that even getting back at Tara for meddling? I don’t understand your weird hate-crush on her *at all*.”

“Good thing it’s none of your business then,” Hal sniped.

Fair enough. “Let me see the card.”

“What? No, it’s my bullshit gift from the fae, not yours.”

I considered putting him in another headlock, but he’d probably see it coming. The pears had been through enough this morning, anyways. I settled for snatching it out of his hand instead. It was the

size of a business card, made from the same heavy-weight paper as the fancy invitations Tara's parents sent for their traveling lectures. True to Hal's word, both sides were blank.

"Kind of a lame intimidation tactic," I said, passing it back to Hal and watching him slip it into his pocket.

He grinned, not as widely as the strange fae from the market but almost as mischievously. "Now you're getting it."

The incident at the marketplace didn't come up again for a while. We both agreed not to tell Dad about it unless we saw the fae again, because neither of us wanted to sit through the don't-talk-to-strangers- especially-if-they're-magical-creatures lecture again. Unsurprisingly, Hal was smug when he pointed out that it'd been almost two weeks and we'd seen hide nor hair of any fae. He didn't quite manage to dodge the half-hearted smack I threw his way, which made me feel better.

I found the card again while I was going through Hal's desk, looking for the drawing pencils he'd stolen from me. When I held it up to the light, I saw that he'd used it as scrap paper at some point. There was a sketch of a mechanical spider in one bent corner, and a nonsense string of math scrawled over most of the paper.

"You mind if I get rid of this?" I asked, turning towards where Hal was half buried in the closet, on a quest to locate something or another.

"What?" Hal leaned out of the closet, one boot in hand. "Oh, yeah. Go ahead."

"Cool." Idly, I ripped the card in half as I took a step away from the desk, intending to throw the pieces into the trash. I didn't make it that far.

By the time my foot settled back on the ground, the floor of our room had melted away. Adrenaline punched through my chest, accompanying the vague sense of unease that settled over me. I stumbled over the gnarled roots suddenly criss-crossing under my feet, catching myself on a nearby tree trunk.

Hal looked back at me, startled. The closet, like the rest of our room, had disappeared without a trace. He looked over his shoulder at the expanse of trees—taller and wider than any in the woods around town, the sort of massive that implied incredible age. Then he said, in his ‘what did you do’ voice, “You’re so lucky I already found my other shoe.”

I gave Hal the pieces of the card and paced back and forth across the tiny clearing while he laced up his boots. The trees stretched as far as I could see in all directions, towering higher than any of the buildings in town. The lowest branch was at least a hundred feet up. High above that, the canopy was so tightly woven together that, though there were various gaps between the trees, little light made it all the way down without interruption. There was no path to speak of; the ground was a free-for-all of thick, overlapping roots and fallen detritus—prime ankle-twisting territory.

An injury like that in an environment like this, where the low lighting and thickly packed trees made it impossible to see who was coming at you, friend or foe... I didn’t want to think about it.

No matter which way I turned, everything looked the same. At the same time, nothing at all was familiar. The contradiction made me dizzy. The air hung silently around us, void of the clattering of wooden wheels on the roads and the muffled hum of conversation. There weren’t even any birds, as far as I could tell. The sparse undergrowth was mostly made up of thin, bendy branches and dark leaves the size of my thumb. The soil was dark as a nightmare, soft and loamy instead of the stony dirt that made it impossible to grow much of anything back home.

“Well, ripping it again did nothing.” Hal finally stood up, peering at the canopy above with vague intrigue. I ignored him and kept pacing.

Not for the first time, I envied Hal’s ability to roll with the punches. It was hard not to, when he barely seemed to be affected by the same things that could send me spiralling out of control. As I watched him examine our surroundings, the frustratingly familiar sensation of pins and needles began prickling up my limbs. How was he so *unbothered*?! He must be an idiot not to be worried right now.

An idiot that was handling the situation much better than I was. In that moment, with my shoulders drawn up to my ears as if magnetized, with the slanting slopes that made up the trunks of the trees closest appearing to sway closer, boxing me in—I would’ve gladly exchanged my hypersensitivity for his emotional disconnect.

“Want to just pick a direction and start walking?” He watched me walk back and forth. The weight of his eyes on my back just irritated me more.

“That’s a *great* idea, let’s get even more lost.” My voice came out sharper than I meant it to.

Hal wasn’t offended. He was used to me snapping at him. “I mean, we can’t really get *more* lost. At least if we go somewhere we’ll be collecting more data. Gets us closer to figuring out where we are, not farther from it.”

The glare I gave him was exactly as sharp as I meant it to be.

Hal’s eyebrows raised. “So it’s like that, then. Okay. Do you think we should do nothing? Just stay put and hope that someone finds us?”

I hated how casually he spoke. I couldn’t tell if he was mocking me or genuinely asking my opinion, not with my heart rattling around in my chest like it was looking for the most painful way out. I felt like I couldn’t tell left from right or up from down, but not being able to read Hal upset me more.

I reached the other side of the clearing and turned too quickly. I tripped and the swoop my stomach made when I caught myself on my knees was nauseating. Hal grabbed the back of my neck and pushed until I was sitting on the ground instead, grimacing when he realized that his hand was covered in my sweat.

“You need to chill out.”

“I am aware,” I gritted out through clenched teeth. As dark as it was, the light still felt like it was poking me directly in the corneas. “Give me like, ten minutes and I’ll be peachy.”

“You gonna be okay if I walk around for a sec, or should I stay here?” He sounded uncomfortable, which is how I knew he was concerned. Even after seeing me like this more times than I cared to admit, he still didn’t know what to do to help me. To be honest, this time there wasn’t much he *could* do. Letting him start problem solving was a better use of both our time.

I waved him off, finally shutting out the meager lighting and dropping my head onto my knees. I’d skinned one of them when I fell, and I busied myself with picking at the new tear in my pants while I tried desperately not to think about anything at all.

I’d gotten myself mostly under control by the time Hal reappeared. My heart didn’t feel like it was slamming up against my ribs anymore, and the feeling had returned to my fingers and toes. He sat next to me and leaned on the tree behind us, looking as if he was considering something carefully.

I sighed and tilted my head up to look at the canopy. “What should we do now?”

As with *Lover’s Bane*, I really like this one too. We have everything – excellent character development, expert narrative building, magic and suspense. You had my attention all the way through. One thing to discuss: is this part of a bigger story or does it end here?

Ne buvez pas l'eau

Première partie

Ce n'était pas souvent que les fées nous rendaient visite. Quand elles le faisaient, c'était pour causer des ennuis.

Je n'ai pas pris la peine de couvrir le bâillement qui m'est échappé de la bouche. C'était beaucoup trop tôt pour un même de quatorze ans qui se respecte d'être réveillé, encore moins de faire des corvées, mais Tara avait maintenu que nous avions besoin de plus de fruits dans notre alimentation. Papa l'écoutait sans doute le plus souvent; elle était son apprentie depuis plus de deux ans maintenant et elle ne l'avait pas encore déçu.

La vendeuse de fruits gardait un œil vigilant sur nous alors que Hal inspectait l'étalage avec beaucoup plus d'intensité qu'il ne l'était nécessaire pour acheter des fruits. J'étais sûr que la vendeuse nous regardait parce que, grâce à une nouvelle poussée de croissance, nous étions tous les deux dégingandés et un peu maladroits. Bien que nous soyons censés être identiques, la plupart des gens pouvaient savoir qui était qui. Avec mes cheveux en bataille et des vêtements froissés, j'avais presque toujours l'air récemment d'être sorti du lit. Hal faisait un peu plus attention à son apparence, mais on avait l'impression qu'il avait mis un seau d'eau en haut d'une porte et attendait que quelque pauvre gogo le renverse. Quand les gens me voyaient, ils ne ressentaient pas le besoin de vérifier qu'ils avaient toujours leurs portefeuilles. Des fois des inconnus tâtaient leurs poches avec appréhension quand Hal passait à côté d'eux. Aux rares occasions où Hal avait une apparence peu soignée, il se pourrait que quelqu'un se trompe et l'appelle 'Hudson,' mais je n'avais pas été appelé 'Hal' depuis que nous avons neuf ans.

Je repoussais ses plaintes à propos de certaines apprenties fourrant leur nez dans ses oignons, parce que j'avais écouté ses jérémiades depuis que nous avons appris à parler, et il ne l'avait jamais fermé depuis. Il était anormalement grincheux; il n'était pas matinal, mais il aimait se comporter comme s'il était aux commandes, donc nos courses tôt le matin commençaient habituellement quand il me poussait du lit et fuyait la salle avant que je puisse

riposter. Il aimait dormir autant que moi, mais il était beaucoup plus prêt à sacrifier son sommeil si ça voulait dire qu'il pouvait donner des ordres aux gens—ou si ça lui donnait l'occasion d'être contrariant. Pour ce qui est du voyage, il n'y avait aucune chance de s'en sortir sans qu'Hal prépare une forme contrainte de 'vengeance.'

Il semblait qu'il allait prendre du temps—décider quels fruits signifierait le mieux 'fiche le camp' semblait prendre plus longtemps qu'il avait prévu—donc j'ai flâné au stand de la boulangère pour jeter un œil à sa sélection de petit-déjeuner. Je suis venu acheter l'une des énormes tartes à la cerise pour partager avec lui quand soudainement je me suis rendu compte que quelqu'un était debout en silence à côté de moi. Je me suis tourné, prêt à gronder Hal pour m'avoir pris par surprise, mais les mots sont morts à ma bouche.

J'ai levé les yeux vers l'inconnu—et les ai levés encore et encore. L'homme était la plus grande personne que j'avais jamais vue, même plus grande que Papa, qui n'avait rien d'un lutin. Ses cheveux étaient longs et étrangement sombres, comme s'ils absorbaient la lumière plutôt qu'ils ne la réfléchissaient.

« Puis-je... vous aider? » J'ai demandé, distrait par les traits très anguleux de l'inconnu. Est-ce que ça faisait mal d'avoir un visage si pincé? Sûrement.

L'homme a souri. Il n'y avait rien de particulièrement menaçant dans son sourire (aucune dents aiguisées ou rictus sinistre, du moins) mais il m'a rendu nerveux. Ses yeux étaient ternes, fixés sur mon visage avec beaucoup trop d'intensité. Il avait, je me suis rendu compte, des oreilles pointues qui sortaient des cheveux de l'homme—la fée. Il ne prenait pas la peine de dire quoi que ce soit, il avait simplement aux lèvres ce sourire dérangeant et laissait s'éterniser le moment.

Jetant un coup d'œil au comptoir, j'ai vu que la boulangère et sa femme s'étaient éloignées au fond, hors de vue. Abandonné une fois encore pendant mon heure de besoin. Alors je m'occuperai de lui moi-même. « Je dois probablement rejoindre mon frère, » ai-je dit. C'était une pitoyable excuse, mais j'étais péniblement conscient que la fée était debout entre moi et la

rue. L'idée qu'il m'empêcherait à bras-le-corps de partir m'est passée par la tête, et elle était assez gênante.

Il ne semblait pas être pressé de me laisser partir. Ses yeux ont suivi mes mains gigotants jusqu'à mes flancs et la façon dont j'ai transféré mon poids d'une jambe à l'autre. Bien sûr, il m'évaluait—pourquoi, je n'en avais aucune idée. J'avais le sentiment que c'était un test avec des conséquences considérables. La vraie question était s'il valait mieux que j'échoue ou réussisse.

Avant que j'aie pu faire quelque chose de stupide, comme laisser échapper cette observation, Hal est apparu sous l'auvent rayé du stand de la boulangère. C'était un problème de résolu; malheureusement, j'étais immédiatement forcé à réévaluer la situation. Ma plus grande peur n'était plus de mettre les pieds dans le plat, c'était qu'Hal ne réalise pas que nous jouions avec la mort, et que la mort était *très* intéressée.

« Des jumeaux, » la fée a dit, mettant fin à son silence. Il a regardé Hal d'une façon qui m'a fait dresser les cheveux sur la tête. Son sourire est devenu tranchant et amusé. Plutôt que simplement évaluer, il semblait adorer rien d'autre que de faire toutes ces choses louches et troublantes que les fées aimaient faire aux gamins quand leurs parents n'étaient pas là. Le regard prédateur s'est atténué quand il s'est tourné pour me regarder, mais ce n'était pas réconfortant le moins du monde.

Hal s'est évidemment senti aussi perturbé que moi, parce qu'il avait la même expression mécontente au visage qu'il avait quand Tara nous appelait 'gamin.' J'ai marché sur son pied avant qu'il ait pu faire une de ses remarques sarcastiques et donner à la fée une raison de passer de l'observation à l'action. Ce n'était pas comme s'il en avait besoin.

« Ils sont de bonne augure, tu sais, » dit la fée—nonchalamment, comme s'il n'était pas capable de briser net les os de mon bras juste en y pensant un peu trop fort. Comme s'il ne savait pas qu'on n'était pas sûr s'il allait le faire ou non; les fées ne tenaient pas à la modération. Ce n'était pas à elles d'être gentilles. C'était le boulot des humains en tant que

partie plus faible, quelque chose dont j'aurais souhaité être moins viscéralement conscient à ce moment-là.

« C'est ce qu'on dit. » Hal a lancé un regard oblique vers le visage de la fée.