**Summary**

Saving the world is a little more complicated than you’d think.

When Akko Kagari unlocked the Grand Triskelion and returned magic to the world, she expected everyone to be happy about it. But when an all-new class of witches arrives at Luna Nova, it’s not long before she realizes that not everyone feels the same way about magic’s resurrection as she does.

Tiffany Vandergard just wants to become a great witch like her mother, and do some good in the world. It would be a lot easier if her old best friend hadn’t decided to hate her out of nowhere, and if her new friends weren’t such handfuls, and if her self-appointed mentor wasn’t such a nutcase. And then there’s the problem of this legendary broom that’s decided to latch onto her.

A story dedicated to anyone who’s ever tried to help.
“Mother?”

“Yes, Tiffany?”

“Why do I have to go to public school?”

“Tiffany,” her father growled, one hand gripping the steering wheel and the other primed over the horn. “You have asked this question ten times in the past three days. The answer is not going to change.” He sounded stressed. Tiffany got it: there were a lot of cars in front of them, and they weren’t moving an inch. New Amsterdam might have been the greatest city in the world, but the traffic stank.

Her mother sighed, then turned around in the front seat to look at Tiffany in the back. “Tiffany,” she said, and that was enough prompting for Tiffany to look out the window in a huff. “Look at me, Falling Star,” her mother said, in that warm way that was impossible to ignore.

Tiffany groaned and looked forward. “School’s not just about learning facts,” her mother said with a smile. “It’s about meeting people. Not tutors,” she added, as Tiffany tried to speak up. “People your own age. You’ve got to show them what you’re made of, after all.”

“Don’t wanna,” Tiffany grumbled, crossing her arms.

“You’re going to be at Luna Nova one day. You have to learn to get along with girls your own age—dear.”

The last part was addressed at Tiffany’s father. He was fidgeting his hand on the steering wheel, and Tiffany couldn’t see his mouth, but she knew he was doing the angry grimace thing. “The light is green,” he muttered in strangled tones, looking straight at the cars ahead. “How are you not seeing this? Are you colorblind?”

“Honey,” her mother said, “just let me take care of it.”

“But then the traffic wins,” her father said, slamming the horn twice. Tiffany winced at the burst of noise. “I can’t let the traffic win, Vicky!”

“Dear.” Now Mother was using the warm voice on Father. Tiffany knew how this was going to end. “You’re a valiant road warrior, but would you rather defeat the traffic, or get our daughter to her first ever day of school on time?”

Her father took a deep breath; then his shoulders slackened, and he stopped fidgeting. “All right,” he said.

“Thanks, honey.” Tiffany’s mother leaned in to give him a quick peck on the cheek, then rummaged in her purse. “For goodness’s sake, it always falls to the bottom—here we go,” she said, lifting her red wand from the purse. It shimmered with light as she tapped it twice against the dashboard and declared, “Intactilis.”

Tiffany shivered as magic flooded gradually throughout the expensive car, as if it were being dipped in invisible paint. The sensation felt weird on her skin—or rather, the lack of sensation.

“All right,” her mother said, twisting in her seat again to look at Tiffany. “Falling Star, you might
want to close your eyes.”

Tiffany did. Almost. She left one eye just barely squinted open: she didn’t wanna miss it. Her father pressed on the accelerator.

The cars in front of them didn’t move, but it didn’t matter: Father’s car slid smoothly through the Manhattan gridlock like a ghost. Tiffany winced as she found herself phasing through women, children, and dogs. Several gasps and honks hit her ears, along with more than one exclamation of, “Freaking witches!”

They made it to the elementary school at a rate unheard of for a New Amsterdam morning. Her father parked the car outside the school—overlapping with another parked car—and her mother got out, opened Tiffany’s car door, and unbuckled her from her car seat. Once they were both on the sidewalk, Tiffany’s mother tapped them both and whispered, “Tactilis,” and Tiffany felt the air on her face once again.

“Well, I think that’s everything,” Tiffany’s mother said, stowing her wand again. “Work hard, be brilliant, meet new people, and let me know if any of the teachers give you a hard time, okay, Falling Star? Mother will handle it.”

Tiffany winced. “Mother,” she said, “please don’t call me that.”

“But you’re my little falling star!” Her mother leaned in and, with a little cutesy noise, pulled Tiffany into a hug.

“It’s weird!” Tiffany said, her voice muffled in her mother’s dress. “And there’s people around!” With some effort she struggled free of the hug. “Why do you even call me that, anyway?” she whispered, so the pedestrians on the sidewalk couldn’t hear.

“But you’re a Vandergard, Tiffany.” Her mother crouched down, placed her hands on Tiffany’s shoulders, and looked her in the eyes. “And when a Vandergard touches down, she always makes a big impact.”

“Vicky!” her father called from the car. “We’ll be late to the conference!”

Her mother leaned in to kiss her on the cheek, and Tiffany allowed it. “Love you,” she said, and then tapped herself with her wand again. “Have a good day at school, Falling Star! We’ll pick you up right here, okay? Bye!”

Her mother waved as she stepped into the car, then closed the door. Tiffany’s father backed out of the space, and as he pulled out onto the road, Tiffany could see their car’s V hood ornament. Then it was gone, clipping through cars in defiance of the laws of physics and traffic alike.

Tiffany’s ears were on fire. She’d said it again. She’d said ‘Falling Star’ again, as if it wasn’t the weirdest nickname ever. And there were people around.

Still, it could be worse.

“Mom!” said another girl’s voice from further down the sidewalk. “Don’t call me that!”

“But you’re my little lambykins!” said the girl’s mother, a somewhat out-of-breath looking woman who scooped her up in a hug. “And you’re just the cutest little girl in the world, yes you are!”

“Mooooooooom!”
Tiffany hid her giggles behind her hand.

“All right,” the mother said, fishing a paper card from her purse and handing it to the girl. “You know how to use a MetroCard now, right? You have to get yourself home today. Dinner’s in the fridge, so just microwave it, okay? I’ll be home later.”

“Yeah, Mom,” came the resigned reply.

“Have fun at school! Good luck! Love you, Alice!” The woman leaned in for a kiss on the cheek, and then was backing away. “I’ve got to go or I’ll be late for work—bye, lambykins!” She twisted around as she moved, and was soon running down the sidewalk.

Alice stood there, alone on the pavement even as parents and kids walked by. She looked up at the building—Tiffany would say it looked like a castle, but she knew what real castles looked like and this wasn’t it—and gulped.

Well, Mother had said to make new friends.

Tiffany sidled closer, and eventually the girl—Alice—noticed. “What?” she said. “What’s so funny.”

Oh. Tiffany was still smiling. “Sorry,” she said. “I just… lambykins?”

“Shut up!” Alice huffed, shrugged her bookbag, and marched toward the steps.

“No, wait, I just mean—” Tiffany ran after her to catch up. “My mother does that too.”

“Does what?”

“Calls me something dumb. She calls me….” Tiffany looked around for potential eavesdroppers, then whispered, “‘Falling Star’.”

Alice stared resolutely ahead, and to her credit managed to keep it up for five seconds. But at length, a laugh burst out. “Falling Star?” she said, a little too loudly for Tiffany’s taste. “What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know!” Somehow it was easier to laugh about it with this girl than it was with her mother. Tiffany stuck her hand out once she was done giggling. “But you can call me Tiffany!”

“Alice.” Alice grabbed her hand and shook hard, even though she wasn’t very good at it.

It was recess, and Tiffany was gawping at the object in Alice’s hand. “You’re a witch too?” she whispered in their corner of the playground. “Mother says we’re really rare!”

“We are?” Alice twiddled her fingers, still holding her wand. “Mom’s a witch too, but she’s never said how many other witches there are in New York.”

“New Amsterdam.”

“What?”
“Uh... nevermind.”

“Anyway, I just know I haven’t met one. She…” She sighed. “She actually hasn’t told me a lot about being a witch—I check out a lot of books from the library. I’ve learned a bunch, though!” she added, perking up.

“Really? Show me!” Tiffany leaned in.

“Okay.”

Alice leaned toward the ground. Between the two of them, on the mess of woodchips that made up the playground’s surface, a little weed had sprung up. It wasn’t any taller than Tiffany’s foot, and only had two leaves to speak of. Alice took a deep breath, held the tip of her wand over the plant, and whispered, “Foraen mugrowna.”

The weed shimmered, and by and by it grew toward Alice’s wand. But only slowly. After a few seconds, it faded, having only grown about four inches. Alice sighed. “I know it’s not a lot—”

“That’s amazing!” Tiffany said, once her mouth had stopped being wide open. “I can’t do anything like that yet, and I’ve been practicing forever! All I know how to do is make stuff float so far!”

“R-really?”

“Yeah!” Tiffany shrugged. “Not like it matters. I’m not that interested in magic—but wow! You’re gonna be a great witch some day!”

Alice blushed. “Thanks…. I wish I could do more, but my mom’s apartment isn’t that close to the Sorcerer’s Stone at Vandergard House. This school’s a lot closer, but….”

Tiffany gasped, and leaped to her feet. “You should come to my house after school! I’m sure Mother would be happy to have you, and we could practice magic together!”

Alice looked up. “Do you live close to the Vandergards or something?”

Tiffany could only giggle until Alice’s eyes widened. “No way,” she said.

“Your house is so big!” Alice yelled, as she got out of the Vandergards’ car.

“Yes, yes,” Tiffany admitted. It was pretty big—bigger than the school, and a lot prettier. A giant V emblem was emblazoned on the front like on the car’s hood ornament. Best of all was the green-blue light shining from the highest tower, where her parents said their family’s Sorcerer’s Stone was located.

Speaking of which. “Try it, try it!” she said.

Alice stared at her for a moment before her eyes widened in comprehension. She bounded toward a flower bed, wand in hand, and yelled, “Foraen mugrowna!”

The marigold she was pointing at shimmered, then vibrated, then burst five feet out of the ground. It towered over Alice and Tiffany, and they gaped at it.
“That was amazing!” Tiffany eventually said. “I knew it would look better here—”

“Hey!”

Tiffany and Alice looked around to see Tiffany’s father stomping toward them, with a dark look on his face. “Who said you could mess with the flowerbeds?” he demanded.

Tiffany and Alice gulped.

A second later, her father’s expression cleared up like a storm vanishing, and he laughed. “I’m kidding. Gotcha! Have fun, you crazy kids!”

“Dear,” her mother admonished, following him up the stairs and into the house.

“Come on,” Tiffany said, taking Alice’s hand and dragging her around the house to the backyard. It took a while.

“But—this is amazing!” Alice said. “How are you not just doing magic all the time?”

“Eh.” Tiffany shrugged. “I mean, magic’s cool, but….”

They reached the backyard, but Tiffany kept going, pulling Alice until they reached the shed. She flung the door open with her free hand, then gestured at the treasure trove within. “I’ve never thought it was as cool as flying.”

Alice froze. “Is that…?” She gulped, and spoke again. “Are those brooms? Like, witches’ brooms?”

“Uh… yeah?” Tiffany leaped inside and grabbed her second favorite one from the dozen inside, all arranged in a neat row. “This one’s B grade, thirty inches. You can have it if you want.”

Alice wasn’t responding, but Tiffany wasn’t looking. “I know, only B grade,” she continued, “but I’m afraid this one’s mine.” She grabbed the best one of the bunch, three spots down. “A grade, thirty three inches. One of the best brooms in the country, and made just for me.”

She turned around, and saw that Alice wasn’t following her. Slowly, Alice reached out, a bit like a person at an art museum who knew they weren’t supposed to touch the masterpieces. Which was weird, because of course she was supposed to touch these. They were brooms. “Come on,” Tiffany said, “pick one so we can race!”

“I… I’ve…” Alice frowned and looked off to the side.

“What’s the matter?” Tiffany bounded back out, broom in hand. “You’ve ridden before, right?”

“What? Uh, yeah! A ton!” Alice said, trying in vain to hide her shameful blush with a hand. Finally she sighed. “I… don’t have any brooms at home.”

Tiffany gasped.

“I’ve… never even ridden one before.” Alice looked absolutely miserable. “I think I’ve seen one, like, at the museum?” she offered.

Tiffany kept staring, and Alice backed away. “Is that, like, okay? Are we still friends, or—”

Tiffany ran back into the shed, grabbed a broom, ran out, and shoved it into Alice’s hands. “I’m going to teach you to fly right now!”
It was a few years later, and it was summer, and they were drenched in sweat.

Not just because it was summer, though.

“You two,” Alice’s mother said, crouching to look at the girls’ eye level, “need to know when to slow down.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Alice panted, her face red with exertion. She sounded about as sorry as Tiffany felt—not at all. Tiffany glanced over her shoulder again to see the good work they’d done; two patches of flowers, grown to unnatural heights by Foraen Mugrowna. Tiffany’s flowers were ten feet tall, but Alice’s would have surpassed twenty feet if they hadn’t started drooping in the middle. Either way, Alice had won.

If only Alice’s mother cared. Instead she tutted and pulled out her wand. “You need to stay hydrated in the summer heat,” she said, whisking it around in the air. A pitcher of lemonade appeared in the air, and beneath it two glasses—well, that wasn’t quite right: one ornate glass bottle, and one plastic cup. As usual.

Tiffany and Alice both sighed as the pitcher poured, its stream of lemonade bifurcating to fill both cups at the same rate. “Drink up, you two!” she said, and the two full containers floated forward. As usual, Tiffany got the glass and Alice got the cup.

“Thanks, Mom,” Alice said, still as red as before, but not from exertion. She looked as ashamed as if her mother had called her ‘lambykins’ a hundred times, and Tiffany for her part felt no small amount of fremdscham—a word she’d had to look up to describe how she felt when this happened, because it kept happening.

“Why does your mother do that?” she hissed, as both of them beat a retreat from Alice’s mother.

“I don’t know….” Alice took another deep breath, then a long draught from her cup. Once she’d swallowed, she poured what was left over her short black hair and continued, “I think it’s because she makes less money than your parents do.”

“No she doesn’t! My parents don’t make money, they just have money.” Tiffany pouted. She tried doing the same thing Alice was doing, but it only got her white-blonde hair wet. She didn’t see what was so good about that. “And also drag me to conferences. Your mother goes and does things, and leaves you alone.”

Alice sighed. “It’s not as fun as it sounds. But hey—” she smiled “—at least I get to come over here when she’s working late. What do you want to do next?”

“How about….” Tiffany flicked up her wand, and the door to the shed burst open; Tiffany’s and Alice’s brooms flew out into Tiffany’s hand. “A broom race! First one around the grounds wins!” She held out Alice’s broom.

Alice ughed, and Tiffany wished she had a better word for it than that. “We always do that, and you always win!”

“You’re always better at magic! Fair’s fair!”
“Then why do you keep challenging me at magic?”

“I dunno, so we can be the best witches ever?”

Alice blushed and looked away.

Tiffany sighed, then perked her ears: Alice’s mother seemed to be saying something. “And let me restate,” she said to Tiffany’s parents, joining them on the veranda, “what a pleasure it is to be invited over. You know Alice has such fun here.”

“Happy to have her,” Tiffany’s father said, smiling widely and knocking back a bottle of beer. “I’m just glad our girl’s been able to find a friend.”

“Oh, and I feel the same way!” Alice’s mother said quickly.

“Yes, we’re all very happy.” Tiffany’s mother smiled. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but if we could just finalize the details of our agreement…”

“Of course,” Alice’s mother said, and what she said next was too quiet for Tiffany to hear from a distance.

Tiffany looked over to see Alice was watching too; then, the two of them shared a look. Then they ducked behind a hedge, moving in concert, and sat down. “You’re thinking what I’m thinking?” Alice said.

“Of course,” Tiffany said.

Alice pulled out her wand. “I love hanging out at your parents’ place.”

Tiffany grinned. This was a grown-up conversation, and even better, it was a grown-up conversation that they didn’t want the kids overhearing. Which automatically made it more interesting than even a broom race.

Alice jiggled her wand in a complicated pattern, one Tiffany could neither describe nor replicate, then held it straight up and whispered, “Subausculto.” A crackle of radio static came through first, but after a few seconds Tiffany was able to hear the voices of her parents and Alice’s mother.

“—magically signed and sealed,” Alice’s mother said. “It’s done.”

“Good. You won’t regret this,” Tiffany’s mother replied. “Your daughter is going to get a chance to be fully immersed in the world of magic. It’s an incredible privilege!”

“Yes, right.” Alice’s mother sighed. “I just… it seems like it shouldn’t be so hard. She reads to me, you know? She knows more about witchcraft than I do, I swear—she’s going to be extraordinary—and recently she’s found this book about the old days of Yggdrasil, and the Nine Olde Witches. When magic was everywhere, and a witch didn’t need to go to any special lengths to find it.”

“Ah, the Olde Days,” Tiffany’s mother said, and then made a sound suggesting a shiver of revulsion. “Those must have been dreadful times to live in.”

A pause. “Pardon?”

“Well, think about it. It must have been the Wild West! Any hoodlum could shove a wand in your face and say, ‘hands up, or I’ll blow your head off’!” Another shuddering noise from Tiffany’s mother. “I’d hate to live in those days. How much nicer things are now, when we can make sure
the right people have access, and magic can be regulated like it should be.”

Tiffany frowned, and mulled this over in her head, like a new food she wasn’t sold on yet. It made sense.

It seemed to make sense to Alice’s mother too, who grunted and said, “Well, I suppose when you put it that way….”

“Bethany, please. Would I mislead you?” Tiffany’s mother laughed. “Oh, and girls?”

Tiffany and Alice froze.

“Yes, you two,” she said in the warm voice. “Tiffany and Alice. If you’re going to eavesdrop, you may as well come over here. Now.”

Tiffany and Alice complied wordlessly, standing up and walking to the veranda, where Tiffany’s mother waited with a smile. “Good spellwork, Alice,” she said, “but you’ve got a lot to learn about secrecy.” She pointed up, and Tiffany looked to see a shimmering patch of air at the top of the veranda—the focal point of the eavesdropping spell.

Alice sighed, and the shimmering dissipated.

“Anyway,” Tiffany’s father continued, “we would have kept this a secret until dinner, but there’s no reason not to tell you now.” He nodded at Alice’s mother. “Beth, would you like to do the honors?”

“What? Yes, right.” Alice’s mother took a deep breath, looking distinctly frazzled. “Alice, you know how your ninth birthday’s coming up next week? And how you’ve always been asking what witch school you’d go to when you were older, and I never replied because we never really had the…."

She trailed off. Tiffany’s mother picked up. “And Tiffany, you know how we’re going to that conference next week?” Tiffany pouted, and her mother added, “You know we’ll do our absolute utmost to get you home in time for Alice’s party. All right, Star?”

Tiffany kept pouting. Star was about as far down as she’d been able to argue her parents from Falling Star, at least with other people around.

“Anyway,” Tiffany’s mother said, “just in case we don’t get back in time, we figured we’d tell you both the big news today. Bethany, if you would?” she said, looking at Alice’s mother.

Alice’s mother seemed to be struggling to get the words out. “Alice,” she began, and bit her tongue. Finally she took a deep breath, and said in trembling tones, “Lamb, you’re going to go to Luna Nova.”

Alice’s jaw dropped like in the cartoons.

So did Tiffany’s, but she got it back up faster. “Alice!” she yelled. “I’m gonna go to Luna Nova too! We’ll get to go together! This is amazing!”

“Nothing but the best for my daughter,” Tiffany’s mother said, stepping forward to ruffle Tiffany’s still-wet hair, “and for my daughter’s best friend. We’ll be covering both your tuitions.”

Alice finally got her mouth muscles working again. “I don’t know… I don’t know what to say,” she said, and heaved a deep breath. “Thank you.”
“That’s an excellent start,” Tiffany’s mother said.

“But wait,” Tiffany said, looking at Alice’s mother. “You said something about a contract.”

“Oh, that?” Alice’s mother smiled. “That’s just the old Gainesbury pride acting up. I could never accept an offer like this without doing a few favors for your family. Boring grown-up stuff, you know.”

Well, if it was boring. Tiffany immediately started ignoring her again and moved in to hug Alice. “This is amazing! We’ll get to go to school together forever!”

“Well,” Alice said, and heaved another deep breath. “It’s great.” She smiled, and her skin shone with sweat. “Let’s do that broom race after all, okay?”

“Okay! Thanks, Mother!” Tiffany curtsied, then ran back to where they’d left the brooms. Alice followed at a rather reduced pace. “Last one around is a rotten—hey,” she said, as Alice staggered over. “Are you okay?”

“M’fine,” Alice mumbled, “just kind of hot. I’ll be fine in a bit.”

“All right, but if you have to stop to take a break, I’m not waiting around for you!” Tiffany laughed, then held her broom under herself. “Tia freyre!”

The broom lifted her up about a foot and a half from the ground. Behind her, and with less enthusiasm, Alice repeated the words.

“Ready?” Tiffany said. Then, without waiting for a response, she yelled, “Three! Two! One!”

She heard a flump from behind her. Not the sound of someone taking off with a broom, but the sound of someone falling off one.

Tiffany whirled around to see Alice on the ground, face up and eyes unfocused. Her skin looked red, but she wasn’t sweating. “Alice?” Tiffany said.

“Tiffany?” she whimpered. “Something’s wrong, I feel really bad inside, get Mom….” Her eyes flicked left and right wildly. “Mom?” she said, clearly trying to yell, but unable. “Mom—help—”

Tiffany rushed to Alice’s side. “Mother?” she yelled, hearing the panic in her voice without really understanding it. “Something’s really wrong with Alice! It’s okay,” she added, looking back down at Alice, “you just need some water or some shade or something—”

What was that spell for making water? Alice had to know, Tiffany’s mother had to know. Why didn’t Tiffany know? “Mother!” she yelled again, seeing her mother hurry over, but not nearly fast enough.

“Tiffany,” Alice mumbled, “help me—”

Her hand rose from the ground, fingers scrabbling for Tiffany’s sleeve. Then her eyes rolled back, and her hand fell.

“Alice? Are you okay? Alice!”
Six years later.

Magic had fallen in with a bad crowd.

There was a time, very very recently, when magic had been in the background. Like a butler at a party, magic had been invisible until necessary, on the sidelines. The leylines and the Sorcerers’ Stones had been the only ways to use it at all. It had a place, and it stayed there.

But then came the day when stars fell from the sky.

Now, magic was in your face. You could almost feel it on your skin, like humidity. Now magic was the loud, blaring extrovert that everyone had to know, and nowhere was that more true than here in Glastonbury, mere miles from the epicenter of the event that had come to be called Starfall. Here, magic strummed the air like guitar strings, playing strange music across the sky.

As far as Tiffany Vandergard was concerned, the song it was playing was Wonderwall.

“Where is she?” she hissed to herself, standing restlessly beside the Glastonbury Tor. Alice was supposed to have been here twenty minutes ago. They were supposed to fly to Luna Nova together. But the only witches Tiffany could see were a bunch of newbies streaming into the leyline who didn’t even know how to fly properly.

“Too far forward,” she muttered automatically, watching failure after failure fly past. “Too far back. The broom’s upside-down. I know it doesn’t look like it matters whether the broom is right side up or not, but trust me, it matters!”

It was infuriating! Magic wasn’t just some toy: magic was important, a grand tradition to be curated and passed down through the ages. And Luna Nova was just letting any old newbie witch in this year! It was like setting a swarm of toddlers loose to fingerpaint all over the Louvre! Didn’t they use to have standards?

And Alice still didn’t arrive. Not even as the stream of newbies became a trickle, and then vanished. “Where the heck—” Tiffany said, but covered her mouth with her hand. She knew better than to use such language, surely!

A few minutes passed with no one. Tiffany grabbed her hat and threw it on the ground in a fit of frustration.

“Hello? Hello down there?”

The voice wasn’t one she recognized. Tiffany hurriedly grabbed her hat, brushed the dirt off, and pulled it back onto her head before looking up to see the new figure. After all, it was important to look dignified before—

Her jaw dropped.

Okay. Tiffany believed it was of the utmost importance to look her best when meeting someone new. The witch landing in front of her, wearing Groucho Marx glasses, clearly didn’t agree.

“Hi!” the witch said, in a chipper voice that made her mustache bristle. “Are you lost?”
There was so much wrong here that Tiffany didn’t know where to begin, so she stared like a frozen computer, which at least gave her a little time to gather more information. The girl ahead of her was maybe a year older than herself—it was hard to tell under the glasses—and did at least seem to be a genuine witch, judging by the broom at her side and the wand tucked into her belt.

Tied to the older witch’s broom was a rope, and at the other end of that rope was not one broom, but two: they hovered parallel to one another, suspending a hammock between them. In that hammock was a girl with mussy, wrinkled robes and her hat pulled over her eyes. Another witch, or else she wouldn’t be able to fly.

*These* were witches. A clown and a deadbeat. Magic really was going to heck.

Finally, Tiffany managed to respond to at least one of the things wrong with the situation. “I don’t believe I’m lost, no. Since I’m literally right next to the Tor.”

“Well, maybe you didn’t know and you thought you needed to find a bus station or something.” The Groucho witch scratched her chin, pouting. “Or maybe you don’t know how to fly. It can happen!”

Tiffany’s jaw continued to hang loosely. No. No, it couldn’t happen, because the Venn diagram of people who couldn’t fly and people who were witches was two separate circles. There was no such thing as a witch who couldn’t fly. Was this some kind of crazy person?

Groucho seemed to remember something and walked forward, thrusting out her hand. “Sorry, I should have introduced myself! I’m Atsuko Kagari! But you can call me Akko, everyone does.”

Finally, something that made sense. Even if it was as basic as an introduction, the intrusion of social protocol into this madness was the cue Tiffany needed to regain her footing. “Tiffany Vandergard,” she said, shaking the Kagari girl’s hand with the gingerness of someone touching a leper. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she lied.

“Likewise!” The girl didn’t seem to be lying, or else was a much better liar than she appeared. Or maybe the Groucho glasses made it impossible to tell, but she seemed to be beaming behind that mustache. “And that’s Charlotte back there. She’s new too!”

The girl in the hammock raised a hand and waved limply, then dropped it back down.

“Charmed!” Tiffany smiled easily. She knew better than to be rude outside her head. “May I ask what precisely it is that you are doing?”

“Ooh, charmed! Witch pun!” Akko giggled, then crept forward, peering at the gateway to the Tor. “Well, last year when I was a freshwitch, I got lost. And then crashlanded in the forest you’re not supposed to crashland in. Which worked out great!” she added, turning around and laughing. The girl was a hyena. “But now there’s no mystical artifacts there anymore, so I was thinking new students might not want to get lost on the way to the leyline or in it, so I’m going around helping lost witches!”

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “What sort of proper witch would get lost?” She turned to Charlotte. “Did you get lost?”

“Meh.” Charlotte didn’t move an inch. Her accent seemed Australian, but for all Tiffany knew it might have been Cockney or anything else. Hard to tell from a monosyllable.

Akko leaned forward, wand tapping the gateway. “Let’s see if I can get this thing to work....”
“Well,” Tiffany stated, folding her arms, “I’m sure no proper witch got lost, anyway.”

The gateway lit up in dancing teal. A numeral formed at the top of the arch: 3.

Akko jumped into the air fist first. “First try! Thank you, Diana!” She turned back to Tiffany and said, “There’s three freshwitches who haven’t gone through yet! You and Charlotte are two, so we’re still missing one….”

Tiffany gasped. “Alice.” When Akko turned to look at her, Tiffany elaborated: “She’s my friend, we were going to meet here—how could she have gotten lost? Was she ill again?” she said, mostly to herself.

“It’s, uh, it’s easier than you think!”

“It is not! You can see the Tor for miles—” Tiffany was insulting her friend. She shoved a hand over her mouth.

“Well, we’re about to go looking for her.” Akko winked, then jogged back to her broom, bouncing with each step like the ground was a trampoline. “You stay right here, or go through, but the point is, don’t get lost, okay? See you at the opening ceremony!” she called, landing upon her broom and making to take off.

Tiffany’s hand came off her mouth. “Wait!” she said. Akko froze in mid-air, and Tiffany walked forward a few steps—just enough to smoothly and precisely transition onto her broom. Not to toot her own horn, but she made it look easy. “I want to help find Alice too,” she said, moving into a hover beside the still-standing Akko. “She’s my friend. I’d rather see her sooner than later. Especially if she’s sick.”

Akko hesitated for a moment, but her smile came back—like a cloud passing ever-so-briefly before the sun. “All right! In that case, just a sec,” she said, and pulled out her wand and waved it.

Tiffany’s luggage—one large suitcase for clothes, another larger suitcase for personal effects—flew into the air. “Hey!”

“You don’t want to carry all that, do you?” Akko said, twirling her wand again and holding out a bag much smaller than either suitcase. Tiffany’s luggage hovered toward Akko, then formed a sort of vortex above the bag, swirling and shrinking until both items had fit inside. “Bag of holding,” Akko said, smiling proudly beneath the mask as she returned the bag to her belt. “Had to borrow it from my, uh, lady friend. Super duper rare.”

“Okay.” Tiffany took a deep breath. “Can we go now?”

“Almost. Funem apparenti!”

Her accent was atrocious, but the spell worked: a rope appeared from her wand and tied itself to the back of Akko’s broom, near the other rope already tied there. “Tie this on!” she said, offering the other end of the rope to Tiffany.

“No.”

“What? But how am I gonna be a good mentor if I don’t keep track of you?”

Tiffany scowled fiercely, but was only met with Akko’s good-natured smile. And the girl, strictly speaking, was her senior… so Tiffany sighed, and tied the rope loosely around the front of her broom. It felt like being a pet chihuahua.
“All right! Cleared for takeoff! Tia freyre!”

“Tia freyre,” mumbled the witch in the hammock. Tiffany didn’t know why: she was already hovering.

Then Akko started moving forward, and the rope yanked at Tiffany’s broom. She winced, and impelled it forward on her own so she wouldn’t be getting towed like a kindergartner. She couldn’t imagine anyone letting themselves be so patronized.

Until she looked to her right again. And then averted her eyes from the reclining witch, to try to preserve some of her dignity.

But as she did, the witch’s hat rustled. “I know what you’re thinking,” she said.

The accent was definitely Australian, now that Tiffany had heard a whole sentence. Tiffany rolled her eyes, just out of sight—not that the girl could see. “I very much doubt that, thanks. Unless you’re using mind-reading magic, which would be quite rude.”

“Wish I could, but nah. You’re thinking….” The girl raised her hat, and a mess of ginger hair spilled out, almost covering the girl’s lidded green eyes. She grinned as lazily as everything else she was doing, and nodded toward Akko in front. “What’s with the Groucho glasses?”

Mind reading magic was illegal in most witching jurisdictions. What an odd thing to wish for. In any case…. “Good guess,” Tiffany said, “but no. I was actually wondering why you don’t ride a broom like a regular witch.”

The girl snorted. “Too much effort. I hate effort. For instance….” The girl flopped a hand over the broom to her left, toward Tiffany. “The name’s Char. Short for Charlotte, because Char’s easier to say, right?”

Tiffany took the hand and shook firmly, but it was like grabbing a fish. “Tiffany Vandergard. And I’d be worried if I were you; that’s not the sort of attitude that succeeds at Luna Nova, if they’ve kept any of their standards.”

“Attitude. Right.” Char slid her hand out of Tiffany’s and retracted it into the hammock. “You know what I was thinking? I was thinking I could tell you why Akko’s wearing the glasses.”

“Hmph. I appreciate the thought, but I really am not concerned.”

“It’s so you won’t recognize her.”

Tiffany frowned. “Recognize her? What do you—who would I even recognize her as?”

“Aaaand now it’s gonna bug ya.” Char snorted. “I think I’m gonna call you Tiff. It’s one of those pun things, see?”

“Don’t call me Tiff.” Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “Who would I recognize her as?”

“The alternative’s Fanny. It fits too.”

“Don’t.”

“Cuz you’re a butt.”

“Tiff is fine!” Tiffany sucked in a breath. “And seriously, who is this Akko person anyway—”
Attention all witches! I mean, just one witch!

Tiffany nearly fell off her broom at the sudden blast of sound. It was Akko, flying in front of her. They’d reached a point about a hundred feet over the rough center of Blytonbury, and she was using her glowing wand as a microphone, not ten feet away from Tiffany’s delicate eardrums. Very considerate.

“We’re looking for a witch who’s trying to get to Luna Nova, but doesn’t know how! If you are that witch, use your wand and send up some sparks, or some kind of signal! We’ll come find you!”

Tiffany had her fingers well-corked into her ears. She glanced at Char, who didn’t seem to be bothered. Maybe it was a noise canceling hat.

“I repeat! Send up some sort of signal, sparks or whatever, and we’ll come find you!” Akko waved her wand, and the glowing stopped. “Oh, I didn’t think this through,” she said at a normal volume, glancing back with obvious worry in her eyes. “What if she doesn’t know how to send up sparks?”

“If this hypothetical lost witch doesn’t know how to send up sparks, what on Earth is she doing at Luna Nova?” Tiffany said with gritted teeth.

Akko squinted. “Gee, I don’t know. Maybe she’s trying to learn how? We don’t all start as experts, y’know: isn’t that the point of a school?”

“Whatever.” Tiffany huffed. “If it’s Alice down there, then Alice knows how to send up sparks. We’re about to see a shining beacon, clear as day!”

Then the explosion happened.

“Whoa!” Char shook as the shockwave and sound buffeted the three of them. She leaned over the side of her hammock, looking where Tiffany was already staring in open-mouthed horror: at the rising plume of smoke from a nondescript Blytonbury street. The after-rumbles of the explosion were receding, letting the blaring of car alarms take precedence.

“Okay!” Akko was smiling. Tiffany couldn’t see her, but she knew all the same. “That’s our witch! I hope!”

Without further ado, Akko dove. “Warn me first!” Tiffany yelled as she was yanked down, whereas Char didn’t react to being pulled. Tiffany snarled, reached forward, and untied the offending rope from her broom, then dove harder than Akko. It was a simple matter of leaning deeper, trusting the broom not to let you fall even as your instincts screamed otherwise, and….

She pulled up at the perfect point above the cobblestones, and touched down gently as a feather far ahead of her dawdling chaperone. Tiffany looked up from her landing and saw the witch: a tan-skinned girl in a hijab, cowering beneath the smoke from the explosion that she, no doubt, must have created.

“I’m—I’m sorry!” the girl said, waving her hands at Tiffany, and shouting so as to be heard over the car alarms. “I was trying to just use Pharus and make sparks and, and it got a little out of—”

Then she seemed to realize her wand was being held in one of those shaking hands, and she squeaked at it like it was a loaded gun with a loose trigger, and dropped it.

This was not something that anyone should do to a loaded gun with a loose trigger, or a wand. As soon as it struck the street, the wand fired off a blast that shattered a fire hydrant ten yards away, sending fragments everywhere and water spraying straight up.
Tiffany jumped to the side in shock. “What are you doing!” she yelled, grabbing her hair in the same shock. “That’s a highly delicate magical instrument, you can’t just drop it!”

“Sorry!”

“Don’t say sorry!”

“Sorry!” she yelled. This was getting more repetitive than the alarms.

The water from the hydrant was forming a pool in the street, and Tiffany backed away from it slowly. These boots were expensive. “Look,” Tiffany said, “you need to fix this. I bet you don’t even know restoration magic, do you?”

The girl shook her head, or at least vibrated it: not a lot of side-to-side motion.

Tiffany sighed, and took a deep breath, and held out her hand. “My name is Tiffany Vandergard. And I’m going to help you fix this before the constable shows up.”

“I—I-Imani,” the girl said. “Imani bint Abdallah al Kairouani.” She didn’t accept the handshake, just stared at the hand like it was a loaded weapon. Which it wasn’t. It was a hand.

Tiffany wished she were home, where people knew how handshakes worked. She composed herself, then walked forward and picked up Imani’s wand in a fluid movement. Holding it like it was… well, maybe still a gun, but one she knew how to handle. One that wasn’t yet loaded.

“Take this,” she ordered. Imani did. Apparently Tiffany was scarier than a wand. “Now,” Tiffany said, pointing her own wand at the hydrant. “Raise your arm like so.”

Imani made her arm parallel to Tiffany’s.

“And repeat after me. Yera Retoure!”

“Yera ….” Imani gulped.

“It’s not going to explode. Don’t worry, it’s a restoration spell. Say it.”

“Okay, okay, okay.” Imani took a deep breath. “Yera ….”

“Yera Retoure.”

The yawning, Australian voice came from on high. Tiffany heard a sound like a clock ticking backward, as little red specks of dust arose from the landscape all around and flew back into the plume of water, reassembling themselves into a functioning hydrant. The spray stopped.

Tiffany glared at the descending hammock, which came to a stop about a foot above the leftover pool. “I was helping her fix the mess!” she shouted over the still-blaring alarms.

“Meh.” Char wasn’t even looking at them; her hat was back over her face. “Maybe she can turn the car alarms off so I can sleep.”

“Taciturnitas!” yelled Akko, landing just beside Char. The car alarms immediately went quiet.

“Never mind,” Char said, and tucked her arms behind her head. Tiffany heard quiet snores begin.

Akko jumped and hopped and skipped toward Imani. “Hi! I’m Atsuko Kagari, but you can call me Akko—everyone does! That’s Char behind us,” she said, pointing at the hammock, “and it’s short
for Charlotte, and I’m super glad that she decided to shorten it to Char and not to Lotte, because I’ve got a friend named Lotte and it would be super confusing. But I guess you’d pronounce them differently,” she added, tapping her chin.

Imani shrunk back, toward Tiffany. “Oh!” Akko said, regaining her train of thought. “And it looks like you’ve already met Tiffany!”

“Tiff,” Char called out.

“Tiffany!” Tiffany replied.

“Call her Tiff. She loves it.”

“Tiffany!”

“So,” Akko said, waving cheerfully. “What’s your name?”

“I’m… I’m Imani.” Imani forced a smile, but next to Akko’s permagrin it just looked sad. “Imani bint Abdallah al Kairouani.”

Char sat up, squinting under her hat. “Imani Bin Abdul… uh… Mani. You’re Mani.”

Imani shrunk back. “Oh, uh, okay.”

“No, it’s not okay!” Tiffany stomped a foot, staring daggers at Char. Well, she’d already been staring daggers. Now she felt she’d upgraded to swords. “You can’t just give people pet names because you’re lazy!”

“Mani’s cute.” Char shrugged. “And no one’s gonna remember that Imam thing.”

“Imani bint Abdallah al Kairouani.” Tiffany recited it syllable-perfect, then smiled hard at Char. “It’s called effort.”

Char groaned and flopped back onto her hammock. Mani raised a timid hand and said, “Um, I’m fine with Mani….”

“No you’re not!” But Tiffany had the sinking feeling that it was fine, after all. That she’d be calling the girl Mani inside her own head.

“Okay, let’s bring doooooown the tension levels!” Akko thrust her hands out between Char and Tiffany, her mustache wobbling. “I’m Akko, I’m here to fly you safely to Luna Nova, and—”

Mani was laughing, and Akko stopped talking to let her. “I like your glasses,” Mani said, covering her hand with a mouth to stifle the giggles.

“Thanks! They’re prescription.” Akko winked. “Lemme just hold your stuff for you.” Without waiting for a reply, she pulled out the bag of holding, stretched its opening wide, and pulled it over Mani’s luggage—a collection of small suitcases and a cauldron with the price tag still attached.

“Do you—oooh, that’s a lot of effort—know how to fly?”

“Um….” Mani’s giggled died away. “Kind of. I’m… not very good at it.”

Mani had tried for sending up sparks, and gotten a bomb blast. Tiffany tried to imagine her taking flight on her own, then imagined the headline, ‘Freshwitch Found Dead in Stratosphere’. “Why don’t you tow her?” Tiffany said, waving at Akko. “And I can help if she needs it.”
“Great idea!” Akko took the rope that was still tied to her broom and tossed it to Mani instead of Tiffany. “Tie it on!” Mani complied. “All right,” Akko said, “just say Tia Freyre and we can do the rest!”

So: a clown, a sloth, and… well, it didn’t feel right to call Mani an incompetent, no matter how true it was. She’d proven to be great at blowing things up. Tiffany sighed, and joined in the general chorus of “Tia Freyre,” and then winced as Mani’s broom jerked up to flying height almost too fast to see, accompanied by Mani’s yelp. Thankfully it seemed amenable to being led.

As they rose, Tiffany found herself looking for topics of small talk. “So,” she said to Mani. “By your full name… you come from the city of Kairouan, right?”

“What? Oh, yes!” Mani blushed. “I… didn’t expect you to know that.”

“I’m very well trained in social graces, thank you very much.” Tiffany rested a hand on her sternum in pride. “I’ve never been to Kairouan—it’s a bit far afield—but I know it’s got long-standing magic traditions. I’d love to visit.”

Mani averted her eyes toward the ground, which was getting a bit far away. “Yes. Very long-standing.” She was sitting as still on her broom as possible, clearly trying not to lean in any direction that would make the broom move on its own.

“I’m from Perth. It’s a craphole.” Char floated back toward them, presumably by some lazy leaning on her part. “Where you from, Tiff?”

“You weren’t part of this conversation.”


“New Amsterdam,” Tiffany muttered before she could stop herself.

Char stopped cold mid-city. “What.”

Well, in for a penny… “It’s originally called New Amsterdam. My family settled it, we named it, it’s not New York City. I don’t care what’s in the books.”

Char’s eyes widened a bit, and she sniggered. “Oh my god. We are going to have so much fun together, Tiff.”

“Please don’t.”

“What’s wrong, Tiff from New York?”

Tiffany’s eye twitched.

There was silence for half a minute. Tiffany’s eyes went to the back of Akko. The girl who was supposedly so recognizable that she needed a silly disguise so as not to be recognized. If that was so, then how could Tiffany never have heard the name ‘Atsuko Kagari’?

Either it was a pseudonym—something which the girl didn’t seem to have the sophistication for—or, more likely, Char was just messing with her. It seemed to be all she knew how to do. Tiffany relaxed.

After a few seconds more, she noticed Akko wasn’t relaxed; she kept twitching and glancing back
over her shoulder. “What?” Tiffany finally said.

“I’m actually from Tokyo!” Akko yelled. “Well, more like Tokyo area, but it’s easier to say I’m from Tokyo because people know where that is! Whoa—”

A sudden gust of wind caught them. Char and Tiffany rode it easily, but Akko and Mani’s brooms were caught off guard, and they jolted. Akko’s glasses went askew on her face. “Whoops!” she said, laughing a little. “Let me just—”

Tiffany had had enough. “Take those off,” she said, zooming forward in front of Akko. “You look ridiculous!” She yanked off the glasses.

Just the glasses. Tiffany looked down at the frames in her hand, and then back up at the big-nosed, mustached face of Akko. “Blah!” Akko cried suddenly, leaning forward, and Tiffany yelped and flinched back despite herself.

This seemed to send Akko into stitches. “Sorry!” she said, pulling out her wand. “But that was so worth it.” She tapped her wand against her nose and said, “Metamorphie Faciesse!”

A puff of smoke burst from her face, and Tiffany coughed, but Akko seemed unfazed. “People really underestimate the Animal Transformation Spell,” she remarked as the smoke cleared. “Sure, it’s really basic magic, but it’s way more versatile than most witches give it credit for.”

And then the smoke was gone, and Tiffany saw Akko Kagari’s face for the first time. And her jaw dropped.

Char had not been kidding.

There had been a few minutes, several months ago, on the day the stars fell. A time when tensions on the European continent had been at an all time high, and war as hadn’t been seen in decades was being threatened—over trivial nonsense like a refereeing scandal. And then, out of nowhere, a missile had been launched, and no one was even sure whose it was.

And then every screen in the world had turned onto the same footage: the greatest magic show ever witnessed. Two young witches, riding a legendary broom, firing a legendary artifact at a missile engorged with magic, ready to annihilate everything in its blast radius. They’d stopped the missile and saved the world.

One of the girls had been identified easily, since she was a rising star in the world of magic: Diana Cavendish, from the Cavendish family of witches. The kind of girl Tiffany could expect to be able to pull off such a high-flying stunt. But the other witch—clearly the leader in the endeavor, more bold and daring than Diana—had been some brunette nobody, and nobody knew who she was.

And now Tiffany knew that the second witch was Akko Kagari. “It’s you,” she breathed.

Akko blushed and looked off to the side. “Oh jeez, this part. Professor Chariot keeps saying it gets easier, but….”

A fit of sniggers broke in as Akko’s sentence trailed off. Char was laughing. She’d been telling the truth. The iniquity of this fact had no chance to impress itself on Tiffany’s brain, when her jaw was too busy flapping. “You,” she said, “you, you, uhm, you—”

“Yup, that was me.” Akko scratched her neck. “Well, it was partially me. I had help. But still.”

“You’re the witch who was chosen. Chosen by the, the Sh—… chosen by—”
“Chosen by the Shiny Rod!” Akko declared, clearly forcing the words through her embarrassment. To her credit, she struck an impressive stance, eyes closed and hand proudly against her breast. “I’m Akko Kagari, the witch who’s gonna make everyone smile! Entrusted with the power of the greatest of magical artifacts, the Shiny Rod!”

“The what?”

“Eh?” Akko said, opening her eyes.

Tiffany blinked several times. “I was going to say, chosen by the Shooting Star. What’s a Shiny Rod?”

Akko’s jaw dropped. “You don’t know what the Shiny Rod is?”

“You don’t know what the Shooting Star is?” Tiffany grabbed her hair, but made sure not to pull. Not yet. She needed this hair for later. “It’s only the most legendary broom of all time!”

“I mean, I know what it is.” Akko laughed. “But, like… that was the same day I brought back magic and stopped a war? So getting chosen again by the legendary broom, like, took the bronze medal in the ‘crazy things happening to Akko’ competition.”

There was a lot to unpack from that. Tiffany’s jaw flapped, her hands yanking at her hair as if to wrench a response from her head, and she finally settled on, “Chosen again?”

“Well, it’s more like I chose it the first time, after Amanda stole it from being chained up in the pawn shop—”

“THE SHOOTING STAR WAS CHAINED UP IN A PAWN SHOP?”

Tiffany’s vocal register had gone so high, she sounded like she was on helium. She took a few deep steadying breaths, hair still painfully gripped.

“Look,” Akko said in a placating kind of tone. “I love the Shooting Star, okay? It saved my literal life. I couldn’t have been luckier to get a broom that flies itself, especially considering I couldn’t fly on my own at the time.”

Somewhere in Tiffany’s brain, she was thanking her genetics for having such strong hair, because otherwise she’d have ripped off two huge handfuls by now. The rest of her brain was trying and failing to process what she’d just heard. She was probably foaming at the mouth, too.

Finally, Tiffany just let herself slow to a standstill in midair, long enough for Akko, mercifully, to pass her. Mani and Char were approaching from behind, so Tiffany shook her head and took more deep breaths. She was an excellent witch of excellent stock, and she was not going to have a conniption about how a girl who couldn’t even fly had ridden the actual Shooting Star.

Deep breaths.

Mani flew up beside her, still towed by her rope, and Tiffany fell into formation to her left. “Is the flying going well?” she asked.

“Mm,” Mani said. She glanced nervously at the ground every few seconds, but seemed otherwise fine. Then she looked forward at Akko. “Did she say she’s the one who brought back magic?”

“Yes, she did.” Another deep breath, and then Tiffany continued. “Whether you believe that is another question.”
“Hm. I don’t think I like her very much.”

A little fire of companionship lit in Tiffany’s heart, and she flew a little closer to Mani. “Yes. Me neither.”

Then she stared at Char.

Despite having that hat over her face, Char seemed to notice for after a few seconds. Maybe she just noticed the silence. “What?” she said, pulling up the hat to stare with no small amount of confusion.

“Aren’t you going to offer some needlessly contradictory and inflammatory opinion?” Tiffany asked, smiling brightly. Like one of those predators with flashy colors, she thought.

“Uh… no? You mean the magic coming back thing, right?” Char shrugged with, as usual, the minimum possible amount of motion. “I don’t hate it but, like, it’s not really doing anything for me.”

Tiffany nodded sharply. Nothing was quite so nice as reaching consensus.

“Though I’m guessing you probably wouldn’t be so bitchy about it if your friend hadn’t ditched you,” Char added, pulling the hat back down.

Tiffany glared at her, feeling her mouth ratchet open to let out the mother of all torrents of abuse—but it was pointless. The hat Char was wearing might as well have been noise canceling. It was an armor Tiff didn’t know how to pierce.

She was not being ‘bitchy’ just because of Alice!

They approached the Tor, and then floated through the gateway.

Akko’s wand flashed, and she pulled it out and waved it: a big glowing 0 appeared in the air. “All right, that’s every witch through!” she said.

They floated up toward the leyline. Beside Tiffany, Mani gasped at the vortex overhead, like a forest floating through luminescent space. Above them, Akko leaned down. “All right! Everyone ready?” she said. “We should have plenty of time to get you all to orientation before it starts! No close calls like last time!”

Tiffany squinted. Last time, huh?

The four witches kept going, and the leyline took them. Not gently. That wasn’t how leylines worked. Instead, Tiffany felt the familiar stretching, like she was a slingshot being pulled back and also the ammo inside.

And then… go. She snapped forward and everything went green.

When the moment passed, the first thing she noticed was that she was in the leyline. Tied for second were the pair of arms constricting her midriff and the sound of hyperventilation from behind her. She looked back and saw Mani, or at least the top of Mani’s head, because her face was buried in Tiffany’s back. “Are you, er, okay?” Tiffany said.

“No.”

“Right.” Tiffany didn’t know what to do there.
The third thing was Akko. She was sitting all wrong on her broom. With a load of two other brooms tugged behind her, the way she was just slouching over her broom, it was all wrong! Didn’t she know how dangerous improper form could be—

Of course she didn’t. This was the witch who had admitted to knowing nothing of broom-riding only half a year ago. It would be like correcting a toddler; Tiffany would need patience and a gentle touch.

“You’re doing it wrong!” she yelled.

Akko glanced back. “What now?”

Tiffany zoomed forward, dragging Mani behind her. “You’re way too sloppy with your stance,” she said, tapping Akko’s broom. “You need to sit up more!”

Akko stared at her. Not smiling. So the permagrin had a limit. “I’m doing it fine,” she said.

“Don’t look down,” Mani repeated behind her. “Don’t look down, don’t look down, don’t look—”

“You need to take this seriously!” Tiffany said, and grabbed the other girl, just to adjust a little bit. “With two other brooms towed behind you, you don’t have margin for error!”

Why was Akko fighting back? “I have plenty of ‘margin for error’, now leave me alone before you mess me up!” she said, trying to push Tiffany away.

She darted back, but Tiffany did too. Then she darted left, and so did Tiffany. And on and on. On for a bit too long, in fact.

“Uh, gals,” Char said, as the two of them were pulling one another’s hair, “the ropes.”

It was the note of concern in Char’s voice, however muted, that grabbed Tiffany’s attention. She looked down and noticed two more things: firstly, that the ropes tying Akko’s, Mani’s, and Char’s brooms had snarled; and secondly, that they were sinking. “Oh no,” she whispered.

“No,” Akko muttered, “are you kidding me? We’re doing this again?” Then she glanced up at Tiffany and put on a damming smile. “Hey, you’re good with riding brooms, right? Do you know what the best position is to crash on one?”

“What? There is no best position!”

Akko’s mouth widened, showing more teeth and a whole lot less smile. “You might wanna pick one anyway.”

Tiffany screamed, and they fell out of the leyline.
“We almost died,” Mani kept saying, sprawled on a tangle of roots. “We almost died, we almost died, *we almost died* —”

Akko struggled with the ropes for a few seconds longer, then untied the last knot. “There we go! All done!” With the ropes gone, Char started floating again, humming a little in contentment. She hadn’t gotten out of her hammock the whole time.

“So,” Akko said, grinning a bit too wide, “there’s a lot of pieces of good news. And one kinda big piece of bad news, but good news first! We’re all still in one piece, we’ve all got our luggage—” she picked up the bag of holding and shook it briefly “—we didn’t land next to Wagandea, and we still stand a good chance of making it to the ceremony on time! The bad news is—”

“My broom!” Tiffany shrieked.

Akko’s untying had pulled away the ropes, and as it turned out, those ropes had been the only thing keeping Tiffany’s broom in a simulation of one piece. With it gone, she saw the fractures: it had broken into four. She clutched the pieces close to her, shivering.

“Hoo!” Akko’s voice came from right behind her, followed by a short laugh. “Wow, this feels like old times. Anyway, I was going to say, the bad news is—”

Tiffany whirled around. “You broke my broom!”

“No,” Akko said again, “that’s not the bad news. The bad—”

“It is too the bad news! I got this broom for my birthday, it’s irreplaceable, it’s an A grade broom, and you broke it!”

Then Tiffany quailed as Akko jabbed a suddenly-furious finger at her mouth. “We are in the Forest of Arcturus, which is the bad news, so shut up!”

Tiffany shut up.

“There are dangerous things here,” Akko whispered. Mani covered her mouth with both hands to stifle a squeak, and Akko continued, “Mandrakes that think witches taste delicious. Cockatrices that can turn you to stone with a single breath. And I really hope we’re nowhere near Wagandea, because it’s still flowering, and its pollen can take away a witch’s flight—or magic—for good.”

“Flight?” Tiffany whispered.

“Magic?” Mani probably said, though it was tough to make out what she was saying behind her hands.

Akko looked up at the dense canopy of trees. “I don’t think we can really fly away from here. And I used to know a spell that could get us out… kind of… not really. It doesn’t really work when you want it to. So I’m gonna be a good mentor, and lead us forward so we can walk to a clearing.”

“What if we just sent up a signal?” Char said, and then floated forward so she could prod Mani. “You’re good at it, right? Use that spell you did earlier, the Pharus thing.”

“A—are you sure?” Mani asked.
“What’s the worst that could happen, right?”

“O—okay.” Mani raised her wand in a shaking hand, shielding her eyes with her hat. “Pharus.”

“Hey, what are you—don’t!” Akko yelled, lunging toward Mani and Char. A bit too late.

**BOOM.**

They all stared up at the explosion as it dissipated into thin air, then winced as a shower of shredded branches fell down. “Oh, no,” Akko muttered, hands grabbing her face from stress. “Now the whole forest knows exactly where we are. We need to move.” With that she strode quickly in a direction, picked apparently at random.

Tiffany glared up too. There was a small, wonky tubular series of holes in the canopy, where their group had broken through branches on their fall, and Mani’s spell had blown it somewhat wider. *She* could have flown up through it, if her broom wasn’t *broken!*

She clutched it tighter in her arms, then huffed, and shoved the pieces into her bag before hurrying after Akko as she departed. “That was an *A grade broom,*” she said again. Mani and Char trudged and hovered, respectively, behind them. Mani seemed to be towing Char, in fact.

Akko groaned. “I’m sorry it’s broken. When we’re out of the forest and have a flat surface to work with, I can try using restoration magic on it, okay?”

“I thought you said you ‘brought back magic’, and here you are saying any old restoration magic could fix this?” Tiffany tsked. “Brooms are *special.* I’m going to need to see a master craftsman for the repairs. It could take weeks.” She glared up at her elder. “And *you’re* footing the bill.”

“What?” Akko exclaimed, head turning in a flash to glare down at her. “No way! You’re the one who broke it!”

“I’m the one—?”

“Yes, you are!” Akko gritted her teeth, then took a deep breath before continuing a little more calmly. “You got the ropes tangled up by trying to quote unquote *fix* my flying. You’re the reason we’re in this mess. *So you* foot the bill.” She tossed her head. “Besides, you’re the rich girl. You’re more financially capable.”

Tiffany stopped for a moment, and when she started again, she stumbled. “How did you—owwww—how did you know I was rich?”

“Are you *kidding*?” Akko let out a laugh. “You know, I used to think all rich people acted like you. Snooty, always thinking they know best, *elitist.* And then I met this guy, and this girl….” She blushed. “And heck, even Hannah and Barbara have come around.”

She looked down at Tiffany with something like contempt. “And now you come along. And now I’m worried I’m gonna start thinking badly of them again, just by association with *you.*”

Tiffany tried to open her mouth and *say* something, and succeeded at the first of those. A few seconds later, she remembered to close it.

Akko sighed, and rubbed her forehead. “I’m sorry, that was mean. I’m kind of stressed out. I’ve crash-landed in this forest enough for one lifetime already, and that was *without* being responsible for a bunch of fresh witches. And I doubt there’s any cool magical artifacts waiting to be claimed
“You’re not responsible for us,” Tiffany said. “Not for me, at least.”

“I am responsible for you.” Akko stopped and put her hands on Tiffany’s shoulders. “And I promise you, I’m gonna get you to Luna Nova in time for the opening ceremony. Because if I can’t do that, how can I be a witch that makes everyone smile?”

Tiffany shook her off and marched forward. Akko continued behind her, a little whine of dismay escaping her lips. Tiffany gritted her teeth: a witch who makes everyone smile? What good did that do anyone? The point of magic was—

“So,” Char said in the back, “here’s how I figure it’s all Tiff’s fault. You know about how the leyline hates salt, right?”

“Yes?” Mani replied.

“Well, Tiff’s been salty as hell the whole time. So she’s the reason we crashed.”

There was an awkward pause. “Er,” Mani finally said, “I do not think I understand.”

“It’s a joke. Salty is, like, slang. It means angry, upset, super bitter. You can laugh now.”

“Ah. Ha ha. I don’t know…. Mani’s voice went a little quieter. “She was nice to me.”

“Well, you’re really cute and in need of protection. Stands to reason. But I’m lazy and Akko’s a mess, so she zeroes in on that and doesn’t see anything else. Typical stuck-up.”

Tiffany could take no more, and whirled around. “Charlotte, are you paralyzed, or are you actually that lazy—”

Which was why Tiffany was the first one to see the giant bird’s face behind them.

Tiffany took a step backward and tapped Akko on the shoulder. “What—” Akko began, and then spun around and saw the cockatrice, and clamped both hands over her mouth. Mani, noticing the both of them, looked up at the cockatrice and went deathly still. Even Char deigned to glance up.

The cockatrice stared at them, tilting its head from side to side. Apparently it didn’t know if they were a threat. Then again, if Tiffany remembered anything about this animal, it was that it didn’t care whether something was a threat or not.

Akko gingerly took one hand off her mouth, and jabbed hard behind her—away from the cockatrice—with a thumb. Then she held up that hand, with three fingers.

Her ring finger went down. Two.

Tiffany tensed, and saw Mani doing the same behind her.

One. Akko’s other hand was slowly reaching for her wand, tucked in her belt. Tiffany hoped she was going for some very powerful magic.

Zero.

Tiffany and Mani ran. “Duck!” Akko yelled as she whipped out her wand, and then she bellowed, “Metamorphie faciesse!” A blast of magic flew just over Tiffany’s head and bounced off the cockatrice’s beak. It crowed to the sky in anger, at an ear-splitting volume.
“That didn’t work! Run!” she yelled, her voice close behind Tiffany and Mani.

“Metamorphie faciesse?” Tiffany yelled back. “Are you kidding me?” The ground was so tangled with roots that she had to devote her full attention to where she was stepping, and could hardly chance a glance back.

“Is that a cockatrice?” Mani called, stumbling as she went. She didn’t seem to have Tiffany’s coordination, and she was still towing Char behind her.

“Charlotte!” Tiffany yelled. “Get moving on your own!” At this, Char zoomed forward, taking the lead. “And yeah, it is a cockatrice!”

There came a stomping sound from behind them. About the size of sound a giant, angry bird might make if it were chasing four irritating witches. Mani shrieked in dismay. “I hate magic!”

Akko gasped. Even considering her heavy breathing, this was definitely a gasp. “How—can you—metamorphie faciesse! —hate magic?” Another magic blast sounded behind them, but with no corresponding cockatrice cry, it was obvious that Akko had missed in her haste.

“How is this the time!?” Tiffany yelled. “Forget it!” She twisted around and pulled out her wand. “Foraen Mugrowna!”

The spell didn't hit the cockatrice, only meters behind them, but that wasn’t the point. It struck the trees around it, and they came to life, their branches and roots rising up to ensnarl the bird’s foot.

The cockatrice shrieked again, and took a few hopping steps, snapping some of the wood. But it couldn’t regain its balance, and it slowly started teetering forward.

“Faster!” Akko shrieked, and they all obeyed without any need for argument. The cockatrice was going to land on them, and there wasn’t another way through the forest.

“Ow!” Tiffany yelled, catching her ankle on a loose root. She stumbled forward, nearly plowing face-first into some bark, and caught the brush of one of Char’s brooms with her flailing hand. Char’s hammock wobbled, and she fell back a bit, just behind Akko.

The cockatrice crashed into the ground, wheezing as the air was forced from its lungs. Momentum kept all four of them going, and they burst forward into a clearing atop a cliffside. The soil was rough and barren as it approached the edge, with no plant life atop it.

Tiffany, Akko, and Mani skidded to their respective halts, while Char drifted slowly to one, rather closer to the edge; she was flying already, and didn’t have anything to fear from the drop. Tiffany whirled around and pointed at the cockatrice. “In your face!” she whooped. “Now that is witchcraft! Stopping a monster, helping people—or should we have tried to make the cockatrice smile?” she said, pointing suddenly at Akko.

“Good going, Tiffany,” Akko said without much enthusiasm.

“And we’re in a clearing!” Mani said. “We can use our brooms now and get to the academy!” It was an incredible view, indeed; though Tiffany could not see Luna Nova, she could see the expansive Forest of Arcturus spread before them like an ocean. From above, it was almost beautiful.

“Guys,” Char said, facing the open air, “I think something’s really wrong.”

Her voice was shaking.
Akko rushed forward and spun her around, and then planted a hand over her mouth. “Oh, no,” she said in a muffled voice. Char’s boots, and the bottom of her robe, had turned to stone.

And as Tiffany watched, the stone crept upward.

“A cockatrice’s breath,” Mani said. “Turns you to stone.” She gasped. “Char, you’re….”

“Got that, thanks, Mani,” Char said through gritted teeth. She shivered, first once and then continuously. “It’s so, so cold,” she whispered.

“Charlotte,” Tiffany said. “I—we need to get you to Luna Nova—”

Char sat bolt upright, staring at Tiffany with such an ugly expression that Tiffany felt herself turn to stone a little. “You,” Char said, her voice harsh like sandpaper. “What is wrong with you? Did your parents hit you as a kid for you to turn out this screwed up, or were you always a stupid asshole?”

“What? They would never—what?”

“You’re the one who made it fall over and breathe on me.” Char rounded on her, hovering closer and closer. “You’re the one who crashed us into this stupid forest in the first place! It’s all your fault!”

Tiffany had known her for only about half an hour, but even so it was shocking to see that expression on her face. That grimace of hatred. “I—I was trying to help—”

“Then stop helping!” Char yelled, and shoved Tiffany back toward the edge.

A moment later, Char’s eyes went wide with realization, but Tiffany found her footing well before she went over. She glared at Char. “Do you ever even think about what you’re—”

The ground beneath her crumbled. The ground in front of her flew upward.

She heard Akko scream, “Tiffany!”, but the rushing wind was louder.
“Oh my god,” Char said.

Tiffany had disappeared from view scant seconds ago, and it seemed like such a short time when it was said like that. Scant seconds. Not an uncrossable gulf. Mani stared, hand outstretched, at the place where she’d tried to grab Tiffany that lifetime ago.

“Oh my god,” Char repeated, and looked down. “I killed her.” Her mouth hung loosely for several seconds.

Silence hung in the air.

“Well,” she finally managed, “she killed me too, so… fair’s fair?”

Something frothing and ugly bubbled up in Mani’s chest. She strode forward, pulled back her outstretched hand, and used it to smack Char across the face. “Ow!” Char said. “Mate, I’m literally dying—Ow!”

“Fair is not eye for an eye!” Mani yelled, hauling back to slap her a third time. “Don’t even joke about that!”

“Oh my god! Be right back!” Akko called out, and jumped over the edge, broom firmly in hand.

Mani scrambled closer to the edge, ready to grab Char’s brooms if any more of this ground crumbled beneath her, and saw Akko mount her broom in midair and keep accelerating. She bit her lip in fear, and then seized up: down at the bottom of the cliff was a second, tiny shape.

Akko went down and inspected the shape for a bit, then flew back up as fast as possible. “She’s alive!” she said. “I think she used some magic to break her fall, but I don’t know if I can move her, and you’ve got the stone thing, and, and….” She was hyperventilating.

“Miss Akko?” Mani said.

“I, uh, I, I… signal!”

“What?”

Akko fumbled in her robes for a second, then pulled out a rectangular device. “Need to find a signal!” she yelled, and then zoomed away out over the trees. Char and Mani were now alone.

Char breathed heavily. Mani didn’t know if it was relief or pain. “Didn’t kill her,” Char said. “Good. Just nearly killed her. Not even to Luna Nova, and I almost kill someone. And Mom and Dad wonder why I didn’t wanna come?”

“Don’t talk,” Mani said, grabbing Char’s brooms and pulling her slowly back from the edge. “Not while you’re sick.”

“You mean, while I can still move my mouth?” Char sucked in a breath through gritted teeth. “Come on. Talk about something. Anything, please. Like… why do you hate magic?”
Mani sat down and hugged her knees. “That’s kind of personal.”

Char sank close to the ground beside her. “Promise I won’t tell.” She winked, then shuddered again as the stone moved a little further, up to her shins, almost at her knees. “Please start talking. I don’t want to think about this.”

Mani squeezed her eyes shut, unable to look. “Well, I didn’t use to be a witch. My mom and grandmom are one, but when I was born, I never could do any magic. Not even a little. And my parents were fine with it, and I was fine with it, because… I’ve watched magic shows, you know? Not live, just recordings. Like Chariot. Ever heard of her?”

Char nodded.

“Well… magic is great from far away. But up close… it’s the difference between watching fireworks and being strapped to one. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” Char said. “Keep going, keep going.”

“But then, earlier this year… there was that broadcast, on Starfall. Those two witches, fighting that missile… Akko was one of them. And that’s why I believe she brought back magic.” She narrowed her eyes. “And that’s why I think I hate her, just a bit.”

“Hate?”

Mani clenched her fists. “Because right after that broadcast, I started having magic. And I can’t control it. All I can do is make stuff blow up. It’s a nightmare. So that’s why I had to come to Luna Nova… to either learn how to control this, or….”

She looked up, off into the distance. A giant tree was visible, twirling into the heavens so high that its top could not be seen. Yellow-white pollen wafted from all parts of it, and she could see some flowers.

“Or get rid of it.”

“Sounds like you care,” Char said, and sniggered a little. “Must be nice. By the way, question: when you talk about getting rid of magic….” She tapped her knees, which had gone grey, with a finger. “Does this count?”

“Stop that!” Mani cried out, pounding the ground with a fist. “How can you just… joke about your own death so casually!”

Char was silent for several seconds. “Must be nice to care,” she murmured. “Tiff seems happy. Akko seems happy. And you seem angry. Must be nice.”

Mani leaned closer and took her hand. “Why do you want to go to Luna Nova?”

“I don’t.” Char chuckled again. “I don’t, like, want things. Or think things, or do things. It’s just, I have magic, my parents had cash. This was the next thing on the agenda for me, you know? It was easier to come than not. So I guess you can see, I’m not super excited about magic coming back either.”

She giggled, looking down as the stone claimed her thighs. “And now… this is one of those poetic justice things, isn’t it? My folks always said doing nothing was bad for me.” A few tears leaked down her face. “Guess I failed at the whole ‘not thinking about it’ thing, didn’t I?”
Mani gripped Char’s hand a little tighter. “I don’t want you to become a statue.”

“Well, if you’ve got any ideas about how to stop it…” Char gripped her hand in return. “That would really rock.”

Mani stared out at the open expanse before them.

“It’s a pun, see? *Rock*, because—”

“I understand. Even though I’m not laughing.” Mani sighed. “I hope Tiffany’s all right.”

“Me too.” Char sniffed. “It’s kinda funny. I don’t think Tiff liked magic coming back either. So I guess we’ve all got something in common.”

Mani snorted. “I guess so.”

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*You’re my little falling star!*

*Why do you even call me that, anyway?*

*Because you’re a Vandergard, Tiffany. And when a Vandergard touches down, she always makes a big impact.*

Tiff’s eyes shot open, and she gasped for breath.

She was in a crater. Well, not precisely a *crater*—more of an indentation. She vaguely remembered having used a spongification spell on the ground just before landing, which must have softened the blow enough to save her life, though—she groaned with each long breath—not enough to stop it from aching. And aching a *lot*, she realized, as she reasserted control over her senses.

Oh, when she got back up there, she was going to *kill* Char.

“Hello?” she yelled, getting unsteadily to her feet. The ground distended beneath her feet as she rose, and she quickly backed off the patch of ground she’d enchanted, letting it bounce back into shape. She took some breaths, relishing the steady earth beneath her, then yelled, “Hello? I'm down here! I'm fine! Come get me!”

No response—they had to be too high up to hear, and probably weren’t looking down. She cupped her hands around her mouth, breathed in to shout again, and then stopped and laughed at herself. She grabbed for her wand, brought her hand up to her neck, and said, “*Amplifi—*”

There was no wand.

Tiffany froze, looked down at her empty hand, and laughed at herself. Muscle memory had tricked her, and of course her wand was just somewhere else on her belt—no, no it wasn’t. It had to be somewhere on the ground….

“Hello?” she yelled again, trying not to think about how her yell sounded a little more frantic this time. “Can you hear me?” This wasn't actually happening, of course, this was just one of those crazy bad dreams, like when she would go to school and forget her homework, or her pants, or her prepared speech—there was no way she could have lost her wand in the underbrush of a forest that went on *forever* and where things routinely got lost until *eternity*—

“Help!” she shrieked, hands cupped around her mouth. “I don't have a wand, I don't have a broom, I don't have anything! I'm stuck! Please! *Hello!*”
She might as well have been demanding a response from the cliff face itself.

Tiffany sank to her knees. Why weren't they coming down for her? They all still had brooms—they could come to save her, right? Why weren't they—

They'd left.

It made perfect, logical sense. The kind of sense that crushed Tiff as if between gears in a giant clockwork. Char needed medical attention, and they were now able to fly out of the forest: they'd leave as soon as possible, leaving all dead weight behind.

There was no weight deader than the one whose blunders had crashed them into the forest, had gotten Char petrified, in the first place.

“Shut up,” she mumbled at herself. That didn't make sense, right? She was good at getting along with other people, wasn't she? They wouldn't just leave someone behind who was just trying to help, would they?

Alice did.

“Shut up,” she whispered.

*Alice ditched you, and now they have too, because you're worthless.*

“Shut up!” This time she didn't whisper: she yelled at the top of her lungs.

And immediately went very quiet indeed. Hands over her mouth, crouching and cowering in horror, everything. This was a forest full of the most dangerous creatures that witch-kind had ever seen, and she'd just been yelling for over a minute.

The thought was a lens, distorting her view of the world. Every whisper of movement in the trees that crowded close was a monster, approaching and ready to gore her. Every rustling hint of sound was the footfall of a beast, inches behind her back—

She turned around and fled.

______________________________

Diana was patting Professor Chariot’s shoulder in what she hoped was a comforting way, and then *Fanfare for the Common Man* blared loudly from her pocket.

It was slightly mortifying, here in the Great Hall of Luna Nova, but Diana was equal to it. “Excuse me,” she said to Professor Chariot and the assembly in general, before turning on her heel and walking away. Smooth as silk.

As soon as she was out of sight, she hurried behind a pillar and whipped her phone out. She used that ringtone for one person only—one person who wasn’t here yet. “Akko!” she hissed, as soon as the phone was against her ear. “Where are you? Professor Chariot is worried sick!”

“DIANA!”

And Diana had thought the ringtone was loud. She almost fumbled her phone at the ear-rending shriek, and rushed to catch it. Akko kept yelling, her voice clearly visible as though she were on speakerphone. “We’re lost in the Forest of Arcturus and Char’s turning to stone and Tiffany’s at the bottom of a cliff and she’s alive but I don’t know if we can move her and I don’t know what to do and I’m the worst mentor ever!”
“Akko, stop!” Diana declared.

Akko stopped.

“Deep breaths,” Diana said, and breathed in and out with her. “Okay. So. One problem at a time. That’s the only way to deal with big things like this: one problem at a time. You’re lost in Arcturus.”

Akko made an “Mm-hm” noise.

“That shouldn’t be too bad. You’ve made it out of Arcturus before, right? Twice now. You can do it.”

“Okay. The stone thing?”

Diana took a deep breath. “Cockatrice?”

“Yeah, it got Char’s feet. It’s spreading. I don’t know what to do. Your family has all that secret healing knowledge, you’ve gotta know something!”

“I think…. One second.” Diana pulled up a messaging app on her phone and sent a quick message to the Cavendish estate: “Need information: how to reverse cockatrice breath petrification. Check family library. Highest possible priority. Please confirm receiving this message.”

Scant seconds later, she got the reply: “Confirmed. -Anna”

“Anna got my message,” Diana said, pulling the phone back to her ear. “If it’s in our records, she’ll find it. In minutes.”

“I hope we have minutes—”

“You’ll have minutes,” Diana said sharply, cutting Akko off before she could panic again. “Deep breaths. Next problem. Witch who fell off a cliff?”

“Her name’s Tiffany, and she’s alive but I don’t know if it’s safe to move her!” Akko cried out, but then remembered herself, sucked in a deep breath, and held it. Diana imagined the sight, Akko’s cheeks inflated with trapped air, and couldn’t help but smile.

Akko exhaled and continued, “I know there’s some stuff where if you have a spine injury, you can’t move the victim or you could paralyze them. So I don’t want to just levitate her.”

“Apparenti lectulo. It’s a spell that creates a stretcher. You can conjure one under her and lift that. Be careful, and she should be fine.” Diana let her voice relax a bit. “You can do this.”

A ping sounded from her phone. Diana held it before her and read the message from her maid Anna, then beamed and dashed off a quick reply: “Thank you so much. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Akko!” she said into her phone. “That witch who got petrified—Char, you said her name was? Make sure she doesn’t stop moving. The stiller she is, the faster it spreads. Moving fast enough can reverse the process, but the witches from Beatrix’s era didn’t have a way to reach those kinds of speeds. They estimated, over a hundred miles per hour, sustained for a whole minute. Find a way to do that!”

“Got it!” Akko said. And there was some of the determination.

“So now you know what to do?” Diana asked.
“Yeah! That’s all the problems! Thanks!”

“Not all of them.” Diana sighed. “Akko, you’re not the worst mentor ever.”

There was silence on the other end for a few seconds. “I am, though. Two of my mentees are nearly dead. That’s really not good.”

Diana sat down, her back still against the pillar. “You messed up. A lot. It’s what you do—but the other thing you do is, you never stop trying to make it right. So you’re going to fix this, and you’re going to become the best mentor anyone’s ever seen. Promise?”

“Yeah. Yeah! I promise!” Diana could see Akko’s shining smile through the phone, and it made her smile almost as bright. “Thanks, Diana. You’re the best.”

“Any time.” Diana chuckled. “See you soon.”

“Love you!”

“I... “Diana shook herself. “I feel... similarly.”

“Oh, Diana.” Akko chuckled. “One day, we’ll get there.”

Diana clicked the hang-up button, waited a few seconds to savor her smile, and then took a deep breath to regain her composure. She still had another freaked out mentor to comfort, after all.

“Speed up Char, put Tiffany on a stretcher,” Akko murmured to herself, hunched low over her broom and diving down toward the top of the cliff where Char and Mani were. Now that she thought of it, Tiffany had probably moved really fast when she fell off that cliff, and Char was already basically on a stretcher. If only they’d switched places—

Bad brain! Off topic!

She landed briefly on the cliffside and rushed over to Char’s side. “Char! The curse moves faster if you’re not moving! Keep trying to fight it off! I’ve gotta go get Tiffany and then I’ll figure something out!”

Oh, she wished she hadn’t said it like that. That just made it sound like she hadn’t figured it out yet, which was true, but still—but at least Char was moving now, Her body was petrified up to her thighs, but at Akko’s words, she nodded and started shaking her midriff as much as she could.

“Gotta go, be back soon, bye!” Akko ran back to the cliffside, and in one fluid motion she jumped on her broom and dove over the edge. She could do this, she had a plan. She’d been on a broom moving super fast before, and she was pretty sure she remembered how it had been done—

Oh no.

Akko landed on the ground, which sank heavily as her weight rested upon it. A spongification spell, perfectly designed for minimizing the damage from a fall, and probably the thing that had saved Tiffany’s life. She’d done a good job casting it in midair.

But Tiffany wasn’t here.

Akko grabbed her hair with both hands and screamed.
Is it me?

In the underbrush of the Forest of Arcturus, even a witch as filled with fear and adrenaline as Tiffany couldn't sprint for very long. She'd stayed along the wall of the cliff, hoping to find some sort of path back to the top, and she'd gotten nothing but a thousand cuts to the legs and two lungs full of carbon dioxide. With her luck, she probably had ticks too.

Now exhaustion had buried fear. Tiffany leaned against the cliff, heaving air into her lungs. She faced the rock, and she couldn't hear a thing over the sound of her labored breaths, and of that question ringing in her head.

Is it me?

She could make friends. She could! She'd done it before. And yet this time they'd only been driven away—what would Mother say? Tiffany kept heaving breaths, and she didn't have the strength to shout defiance this time. In the depths of the Forest of Arcturus, it was easy to feel like a failure.

It was also easy not to hear an approaching monster until it was too late. Tiffany heard the faintest hiss, felt her blood chill, then turned around on the spot.

The hiss was coming from a plant with teeth. Tiffany knew a mandrake when she saw one.

She bolted.

Yet more branches and stalks cut at her legs, and her lungs burned with fresh fire, but she ignored them all and ran forward, still hugging the cliffside. The hissing and howling of the mandrake—mandrakes, if she was unlucky—stayed behind her, and impelled her to run even faster as it or they got nearer.

But then she came to a dead end. A little crag jutted from the cliff, creating a V shape which she had foolishly run into. As she saw her mistake and whipped around, it was too late to run out: the mandrakes—three of them, confirming her fears—crept closer, mouths open. Ready to chew her to shreds: an ignominious end for an ignominious witch.

“No!”

Her foot lashed out and kicked the closest one. It hissed and drew back, and even without eyes, the other two stared at her in shock.

“No!” Tiffany yelled again, kicking again, with no idea if she was hitting or not. “I’m not dying down here! I’m going to get back up that cliff, and I’m going to apologize, and I’m going to fix this! I’m going to save Char!”

The mandrakes didn't take long to overcome their initial shock. They crept closer, bobbing around her kicks, waiting for the moment to strike.

“And then,” Tiffany yelled, “I’m going to get to Luna Nova, and I’m going to become a witch who saves people! I’m going to be a witch who saves everyone!”

The closest mandrake lunged for her.

And then was pierced right through the top by a long, red spear.
Tiffany blinked, her jaw slowly opening, as the spear twisted its way out of the closest mandrake, which let out a shuddering cry. Then the spear whirled around and chopped off the other two mandrakes at their bases.

And no one was wielding the spear. And it had a crop of feathers at the end.

Which meant it wasn’t a spear, it was a broom. A broom that could fly itself.

Tiffany’s jaw was fully open.

It couldn’t be.

The spear—the broom—the *Shooting Star* took to a hovering position, and she noticed something tucked in its tail feathers. “My wand!” she yelled, and snatched it and hugged it close. “How did you find it?”

Then she kicked herself mentally—it didn’t exactly have a *mouth*. But the Shooting Star responded anyway, by jerking the arrow at its head forward. If it had been a human, that would have been the expression for, “Get going already!”

“Right,” she said, and took a deep breath. Okay. She was going to ride the most legendary broom that had ever existed. No problem.

She took another deep breath. Then one more for the road, and finally, with exquisite care, she lifted her leg over the shaft of the broom and mounted it. Nothing but the most *perfect* posture for this broom.

“Let’s go!” she yelled, her smile fierce, and the Shooting Star took off like a rocket.

Tiffany had to close her eyes to slits, with the air slamming into her face. “Where are they, where are they,” she muttered, unable even to hear herself as the wind rushed past. She tapped her ear with her wand and declared, “*Amplificare!*”

The wind became almost deafening—or rather, it became very loud without coming close to deafening her. Because now she could hear much more than before. There were voices up the cliff to her left, and she angled her flight path accordingly.

“It’s helping,” Mani said. “The petrification’s moving slower than before. Keep going!”

“I don’t want to die,” Char kept repeating, as a mantra. “I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die, I’m not gonna die—”

“I don’t remember it!” Akko cried out, as Tiffany approached the peak. “I don’t remember the spells that speed up a broom! I’m gonna have to call Diana again, she’ll know what to do—”

“No!”

Tiffany burst over the ridge, smiling fiercely, and said, “I’m gonna be the one who saves you!”

Let it never be said that Tiffany Vandergard was afraid of a dramatic entrance.

She stared at the three of them, and they stared back, Char forgetting to struggle for a moment. “‘Wow, Tiffany,’” Tiff prompted, “‘how did you ever find the legendary broom’—no, nevermind!” She jabbed her finger at Akko. “You need a fast broom, right? Is this one fast enough to you?”
Akko grabbed her jaw and pushed it back into place. “The Shooting Star? Hi again!” she said, waving enthusiastically at the broom. “Where did you find it?”

“Long story! Not sure I understand myself! Is this fast enough?”

“It should be! We need over a hundred miles an hour for sixty seconds—if any broom can do it, it’s this one!” Akko raised her wand in one hand and her broom in the other. “Mani, get your broom out!” As Mani obeyed, Akko cried out, “Torque apparenti!”

This time it wasn’t ropes that burst from her wand, but three chains. They each attached around the back of the Shooting Star, with their other ends going to Mani’s, Akko’s, and Char’s brooms.

The Shooting Star sort of... * gyrated * as the chains surrounded it. After a moment, Tiffany had an idea of why it was squirming. “It doesn’t like the chains,” she said.

“Probably remembers the pawn shop. Sorry, SS,” Akko said, patting the broom on its shaft, “but we’ve got a life to save.”

The Shooting Star straightened out at these words. “Ready?” Tiffany said, mounting it again.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Char said, as Mani and Akko mounted their brooms. “Let’s go already!”

“One second,” Akko said, and then: “Metamorphie vestesse!” Smoke burst from Tiffany’s hat, and then there was a pair of flight goggles attached to it.

“Thanks!” Tiff said, and then looked forward as she secured the goggles. “Now let’s go!”

The Shooting Star reared back, and then burst forward.

The air wasn’t hitting her eyes now, but the rest of her face was taking a beating. “Hold on,” she told herself, as her grip slipped down the broom. She glanced behind herself to see the other three behind her holding on for dear life as well, with goggles like her: Akko must have gotten all of their hats.

“This is really fast!” Mani yelled, clutching her broom with both arms as well as both legs.

“Not fast enough!” Tiff replied, and then realized that the other three didn’t have amplification spells like she did. “Amplificare, amplificare, amplificare! Not fast enough! We need over a hundred miles per hour!”

“I think the other brooms are creating drag!” Akko yelled. “The Shooting Star can’t keep up—”

The Star seemed to have heard her. It sped up, until Tiffany could almost feel the cheeks coming off her face. “Fast enough for you?” Tiffany yelled, turning her face out of the wind.

And then she saw something in front of her, and glanced forward again. “Oh, no,” she said.

The cockatrice rose from the forest ahead of them, cawing and shrieking. It was blocking their path. Just a hint of its breath had been enough to incapacitate Char.

“I know what to do,” Mani said. Tiffany looked back and saw an expression of uncharacteristic anger on her face. None of the meekness Tiff had come to associate with her so closely. “I’ll shoot sparks at it.”

Tiffany gaped. “Mani! You don’t know how to shoot sparks!”
“That’s right.” Still clutching the broom with her other three limbs, Mani reached back and grabbed her wand. “Pharus!”

An explosion blasted out of her wand and shot forward, striking the cockatrice in the face. It screamed and sank toward the forest, and the brooms sailed clean over it.

“It’s working,” Char said, and as Tiffany looked back, she saw it: bits of stone were flaking off Char’s midriff and getting lost in the breeze. “You guys are actually doing it. I’m not gonna die, I’m not!”

They sped toward the horizon. But not toward the school. If anything, they were probably going further away from Luna Nova. “Where’s the school?” Tiffany yelled. “We’re going to miss the opening ceremony!”

“No.”

This was Akko. Her eyes were hard lines. “You three,” she said, “are going to get to Luna Nova, and you’re gonna be fantastic witches. And I’m going to help you.”

Her wand flashed for a moment—seven bright blue-green points of light. Then she hopped to her feet.

“Akko, what are you doing?” Tiffany exclaimed, as Akko ran forward along the chain toward the Shooting Star, and then—with a grace unparalleled by any Olympian gymnast that Tiffany had ever seen—she jumped over Tiffany and landed on her feet. “Oh my goodness, what are you doing?”

“Being the best mentor ever!” Akko held her wand straight up in front of her, holding it in its middle with her left hand. “Noctu Orfei!” Her right hand was pulled back, almost as if holding a —“Aude… Fraetor!”

Her wand transformed into a bow, inlaid with seven shining pearls, and a giant golden arrow already nocked and ready to fly. “Shiny… Arc!” She pulled back the string and fired.

The arrow flew forward, glowing bright green, and exploded into a giant viridescent circle. “The leyline!” Tiffany gasped as they flew into it. Since when could a witch just create a new leyline?

Mani gasped. “It’s beautiful.”

Char laughed. Tiffany glanced around and saw that almost all of the stone covering her had flown away.

And then she looked forward at the witch who still stood proudly on the prow of the Shooting Star, as if she’d been doing it her whole life. The witch who had just used a spell Tiffany had never heard of to do magic she’d never believed was possible.

She was the greatest witch Tiffany had ever seen.

About twenty seconds later, they were sprawled on the floor of the Great Hall of Luna Nova.

“Atsuko Kagari,” an angry, stern voice was saying, “are you ever going to show up to an entrance ceremony before the nick of time? And through the front door?”

“Eheh. Sorry, Professor Finnelan,” Akko said. “But I got everyone here! And no one got hurt and
nothing bad happened at all!”

Tiffany felt a hand pulling her up, and then Akko whispering in her ear, “Nothing bad happened.”

“Right,” Tiffany whispered back. Then her eyes focused, and she noticed a couple of things.

Namely, the teachers in front of her. A bunch of them, staring in various states of shock, disdain, or even amusement. Three caught her attention, but one most of all.

“Yo,” Char said, rubbing her head as she stood, for the first time Tiffany had seen. “Is that teacher a fish?”

Mani pointed at another one: a translucent image of a witch with light purple hair, projected from a floating red disk and chuckling with amusement. “Is that teacher a hologram?”

Tiffany gasped. “Is that teacher Shiny Chariot?”

The teacher in question—a woman with glasses, a bulbous dress, and tied-up red hair—stiffened, but then relaxed and smiled. “Well, no reason to keep waiting now.”

She pulled out her wand and pointed it skyward, and a brilliant light shone out, blinding Tiffany. When her vision came back, the witch was dressed completely differently: a brilliant white hat and dress, with a red cape billowing behind her. Her hair fell loosely, glamorously around her face. “Welcome,” she called out, spreading her arms wide, “to the world of magic!”

“Ugh,” Mani ughed, as the three of them trudged to their shared dormitory. “I can’t believe we almost got expelled on our first day.”

“I blame Tiff,” Char said, leaning against the wall with one hand even as she walked, so that her palm dragged along the wood and stone. Professor Finnelan had forbidden her from using her brooms as a hammock indoors, but she still seemed determined to support as little of her own body weight with her feet as possible.

However, Professor Finnelan hadn’t been able to do anything about the Shooting Star, which was now floating arrogantly—somehow it made floating look arrogant—at Tiff’s side. As Char tried to reach forward and lean on it, it swerved out of the way, and Char stumbled. She said something that was probably profane under her breath, then continued, “Tiff’s a troublemaker.”

“Ex-cuse you!” Tiff said, rounding on her. “I am a trouble solver!”

“Eh, I guess.” Char smiled at her. “I take back most of the bad things I said about you.”

“Likewise. Wait, most?”

“Hey!” Mani said, in a scolding kind of voice. “Be nice, you two.”

“Least the magic show was cool.”

“I suppose it was,” Tiff replied.

They approached their door. Tiffany took a deep breath, then took Char aside before she could enter in. “Char,” she said, looking her in the eyes.

“Yeah, Tiff?” Char looked back for a moment before glancing away.
“I did some things today that I’m….” Tiff paused for another steadying breath. “Not proud of. I nearly got you and Mani hurt. And I really would like to be friends. So I wanted to say, right now, I’m—”

Mani pulled the door open. The next thing Tiff knew, there was the squealing sound of party favors, and her face was being assaulted by colorful paper bits. “Hey!” she said, tasting them on her tongue and spitting some of them out.

“Welcome to your new room!” Akko cried out from inside, arms spread wide while confetti rained down on her and everything else within. “You guys are gonna have so much fun, being a first-year is amazing, I wish I could redo my first year, oh I’m so excited for you!”

She darted behind the three of them and shoved them forward into the room, where the confetti had finished falling. “I’m your officially unofficial R.A. for the year, so just let me know if there’s anything at all you need, okay? Extra blankets, extra chairs, study sessions, library books, autographs from Shiny Chariot—I’ve got, like, a million now that I know her personally, ‘cuz she signs my homework assignments! Anything at all!”

Tiffany smiled, her teeth gritted together, and sucked in a breath. “Could you clean up the confetti?”

“Oh, right! Sorry. Yera Retoure!”

The confetti flew up again, and Tiffany flinched back toward the bed, as it all collected into a party popper in Akko’s non-wand-holding hand. The Shooting Star shook itself like a dog as it became clean.

“And before I forget, here’s your stuff!” Akko added. She pulled out her bag of holding, inverted it, and shook: a mismatched jumble of suitcases and other luggage spilled out onto the bed, almost covering it. Several items fell to the floor.

“Thanks,” Tiffany said, and sucked a breath in through her teeth. “Now could you get out so we can have some privacy?”

“What? Oh, yeah!” Akko took a few steps back, but didn’t leave. “Right, I’ve gotta meet up with Sucy and Lotte anyway. Which reminds me, I gotta ask her if it’s short for Charlotte like you, Char!”

“Out,” Tiffany repeated.

“Sorry!” Another few steps, and Akko was at the door. “Like I was saying, anything you need, I’m here to help, so don’t hesitate to call! I can give you my phone number if you want—”

“Out!”

“Ow!” Akko said, as the Shooting Star took initiative and jabbed her in the front, pushing her out the door. “It’s 0115-896-0073, bye!” And finally she was gone, running down the hallway as the Star chased her, her voice getting quieter as she ran: “Leave me alone! We saved the world together, and this is the thanks I get?”

Tiff sighed, and slumped onto the bottom bunk. It was closest.

“So that teacher at the opening ceremony,” Mani said, clambering up to the top bunk above her, “that’s really Shiny Chariot? The same Chariot from the shows? No one knew where she was for ten years!”
“Well,” Char said, slumping onto the single bed without even bothering to clean off the luggage from it, “guess she’s here. Unlike whoever that hologram teacher was. I guess she works from home, or something? Sounds like a sweet deal.”

“You would say that, wouldn’t you,” Tiff said, rolling her eyes. She gathered up her suitcases from the pile.

“I sure would, guilty as charged.” Char lifted her hands up. “Also, first thing tomorrow, I’m gonna ask what the deal is with that fish teacher.”

“Char!” Mani said. “You can’t just ask why she’s a fish!”

“Why not?”

“Because… I’m not sure, but it seems rude somehow!”

Tiffany sighed. The teachers were weird, the second years were insane—if Akko was any indication—and her roommates? Her roommates were….

A smile made its way onto her face without her realizing at first. Her roommates were full of surprises. And maybe she was too.

A rapping noise jolted her from her rest, and she glanced over to see the Shooting Star had returned and was tapping its prow against the window. It reminded her of a cat yowling at the door, demanding to be let out.

Tiffany sighed, pushed herself up, and opened the window. The Shooting Star zoomed out into the night sky, and she watched it go, leaning on the sill with her elbows. Even her broom had an attitude now.

No matter what, this year was certainly going to be something.

Chapter End Notes

So I guess I should explain where this all came from. Or at the very least, I want to.

Little Witch Academia is a show that hits pretty much all of my "I must write fanfic for this" buttons. It's good, with lovable characters and an optimistic attitude, yet not flawless. And it's got a huge unexplored world and lore that the show doesn't really get into (we only meet two of the Nine Olde Witches?), not to mention a huge amount of future to think about.

And it's this exact future that I wanted to write about, because at the end of Little Witch Academia, the world undergoes a ginormous change, and I really wanted to explore that! Akko's unlocked the Grand Triskelion and brought magic back to the world!

What better way to explore that than with the help of three girls who don't like that magic's back at all?

I hope you all like what I've done so far, because I've got more where this came from!
The dragon swooped down low over the students assembled in the Great Hall, and they screamed with fear.

But Chariot stood proud upon the stage. “Noctu Orfei! Audin Fraetor!” Her wand transformed into a magnificent bow, and she pulled the drawstring back. “Shiny… Arc!”

The arrow shot forward, piercing the dragon. It swelled comically, then exploded into a shower of lights, and the witches below cheered. All of them, even the ones who’d looked unimpressed at the start.

“Never forget,” she declared, “to believe in yourself! That is your magic!” She wove her wand again and disappeared into a vortex of light, which swirled away to nothing.

“Well, well, that was truly splendid!” Headmistress Holbrooke called out. “Let’s all give a big round of applause to one of our most famous and beloved teachers, Professor Chariot, for making this a very special convocation ceremony!”

The sound of clapping hands crashed like thunder.

Behind the curtain, Chariot sucked in huge breaths through gritted teeth. Her head was light, her eyes wide and strained, and she sagged to the ground against a nearby wall.

All those people—missing their magic—Shut up, she told herself. It wasn’t real, not this time.

But her blood pounded all the same, mingling with the cheers, the screams. She saw their smiling faces, saw little lights coming out of their chests—lights being stolen from their hearts, burning up—

“Pulse: elevated.”

Her head whipped up to see the floating red disk, whirring at her eye level. Out of it came a voice that was human, though still clipped. Sharp enough to cut through all the pounding. “Breathing: fast, irregular, increasingly shallow. Pupils: dilated. Diagnosis: panic attack.”

A hologram burst out from the top of the disk: Croix, with her usual red cloak bundled around her. She was reading some sort of translucent display, but after a moment she waved it away. “These droids can be awfully redundant sometimes.”

Chariot tried to force a laugh, but it came out as more an exhalation. “Croix.” These rapid breaths were still coming.

“You did great.” Croix flashed her a smile. Light flickered across her face, suggesting she was near a fire. “It’s okay. No one got hurt, no Dream Fuel Spirits stole anyone’s magic. Not even actually using the Shiny Rod, just stage trickery. You did great. Deep breaths.”

Another flying roomba hovered close and beeped in a reassuring way. Chariot clutched it to her torso. It was comfortingly hot to the touch, and Chariot felt her breathing slowing down, if only a
“Is that helping?” Croix asked, kneeling and leaning forward, her disk hovering closer. “It ought to be helping.”

“Yes. Yes it is.” Chariot took a shuddering breath, willing her heart to slow. “I can’t believe I let Headmistress Holbrooke talk me into this. I swore I’d never do another show, not after….”

“The moon?” Croix stood up and walked away, though her disk remained stationary, as though she were on a treadmill. She pushed open the flap of, presumably, a tent, and looked out at what had to be the sky—not that Chariot could see that through the hologram. “You know,” Croix said slowly, “I think I like it better this way.”

“Stop.” Blood pounding, hard enough she could hear it. Or was that the applause?

“I mean, the United States government is still furious with you for knocking over the flag, but that’s not exactly illegal. I think.” Croix shrugged. “Then again, what do I know about law? No one’s pressed charges against me yet.”

“Stop!” Chariot said, biting on her tongue.

Chariot’s demeanor instantly changed from confidence to fear. “I’m sorry! I thought we were bantering! I…. Your show was great. Sorry to bring that up.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Chariot shook her head and forced herself to stand up. Still clutching the second disk to herself, she walked toward the back of the backstage and pulled open the drapes.

The moon greeted her, huge in the sky. The moon she’d put a scar in ten years ago. How hilarious: all those years, she’d dreamed of making her mark….

And she had made it, she reminded herself, clutching the disk tight. Akko and Diana were in the audience, and they’d cheered loudest of all. The school had more students now than in the previous thousand years. Magic was back.

“It was a good show,” she murmured to herself. Next to her, Alcor flew in and landed on the sill, and she patted him on the head. He felt real too.

Croix’s disk floated over beside her. Croix smiled, looking her in the eye.

“Where are you?” Chariot asked, smiling back, fighting down the panic and winning for once. “Last time we talked you were in Egypt, and then I got caught up preparing for the convocation… I wish I could have made more time these past few days to chat.”

“It wouldn’t have been that interesting anyway. I haven’t made much progress, I’m afraid.” Croix’s sigh quavered as she shivered. “And the Arabian desert, since you asked. These nights can get cold.”

Chariot hugged the warming disk a little closer to her body, and laughed a little. “Physician, heal thyself.”

“Good idea, but I want to conserve my droids’ power out here as much as possible.” Croix’s hologram flickered. She walked back toward the fire in her tent and sat down, wrapping her cloak tighter around herself. “Even after Yggdrasil came back, there’s some places where magic’s still thin on the ground, and I’ve walked into a dead zone here.”
“You know you don’t have to do this for me, right?” Chariot said, staring out the window. “I love
that you are, but… you know I don’t resent you for any of it anymore. Not the Shiny Rod, not the
Dream Fuel Spirit, not Wagandea. That’s all in the past.”

“Thanks, but that’s nonsense.” Croix sat cross-legged, her chin resting on her hands as her elbows
pressed on her legs. She stared into the fire in front of her. “The past doesn’t stay in the past. It just
keeps going until it becomes the present. You haven’t forgiven yourself either, have you?”

Chariot had no reply there. She just kept staring out the window, out at the cross-scarred moon.

“Yeah. So I’m going to find a cure for your curse.”

“While traveling the world. And continuing to be a professor at the most prestigious magical
academy in Europe.” Chariot shook her head, a small smile on her lips.

“And making time to chat, don’t forget.” Croix looked up and winked.

“When do you sleep?”

“I don’t need much.”

“You mean you don’t get much.” Chariot rolled her eyes and turned to Croix. “It’s after midnight
where you are, isn’t it, Croix? Get some rest.”

She leaned in for a hug, but the hologram fizzled as Chariot’s arms went right through it. After a
moment to realize, she pulled away, and looked down. “Sorry,” she said. “I… wish you were
here.”

“I’ll always be there for you.” Croix smiled, and tapped the ground at her side. “And here for you,
too. Isn’t modern magic great?”

“Only as great as the witch using it.” Chariot put on another smile. “Good night, Croix.”

“Good night, Chariot.” Croix reached to her side and grabbed a cup of ramen; then the hologram
fizzled out. The disk which had been projecting it floated away.

Chariot sighed and looked out at the moon again, still holding Croix’s other disk in a hug. The
moon was beautiful. It was the same moon Croix could see, thousands of miles away.

For a moment, something else in the sky caught her gaze, and she frowned. Something about the
arrangement of the stars….

Then she yawned, and turned away from the window. Alcor hopped onto her shoulder as she
walked. She was tired, and classes were tomorrow and she hadn’t even eaten yet. Time for an early
dinner and an early bed.

“Char, get up!”

“Nnnnn. Too early….”

“It is eight o’clock in the morning, which is a perfectly reasonable time for any young witch to
wake. So get up!”

“Go away. Let me die here.”
“Not funny!”

Mani and Tiff each grabbed one of Char’s arms and heaved her up—from the bottom bunk. She had demanded Tiff switch with her the previous night, with some explanation about gravitational potential energy, and from there there had been a general reshuffling. Tiff had gotten the top bunk, and Mani had had the large bed.

Char moaned, then glanced at the sun streaming through the window and hissed like a vampire. “Put me back.”

“Magical Astronomy is in an hour, and we need to eat first. So no, we will not put you back.” Tiff shook herself and released Char, who at least wasn’t trying to fall back into bed. Apparently, trying to snooze wasn’t worth fighting Mani and Tiff.

“Fine.” Char yawned widely. “Getting changed.”

“We’ll turn around,” Tiff said. Mani dutifully did so.

“Meh. Don’t care.”

“We’re doing it anyway.”

To her credit, Char didn’t take much longer than five minutes to get dressed. However, that was still five minutes of Tiffany standing awkwardly with her back to the bunkbed, which at least gave her time to look around half of the room.

She squinted. The room was obviously constructed in a classical style, to match the rest of the school. The Shooting Star rested upright against the wall in one corner, having returned from its flight sometime last night. The shelf by the window was filled with the books Mani and Tiff had unpacked—Char had done no such thing. Overall, it all looked as she’d expected…and yet.

She wasn’t sure how to articulate it, but the room lacked the sense of age the rest of the building had. Somehow the walls seemed too clean, the windows too clear—not the cleaniness of having been cleaned, but of never having been dirty. It was like a new car.

“If I didn’t know better,” she said, walking out of the room with Mani and Char in tow, “I’d say this whole wing was built within the last year.”

“Good eye! Construction finished a week ago.”

The voice was disembodied but familiar. Tiff looked around, but no other witches were in the corridor around them. “They really had to rush the new dorms,” the voice continued, “what with the influx of first-years this time. Up here! Hi!”

Tiff glanced up and saw a mouse. A mouse with bangs and a half-do. “Gah!” Tiff yelled.

The mouse grinned with buck-teeth, then hopped down. One burst of smoke later, and Akko was standing before them, hands on her hips. “Don’t do that!” Tiff blurted.

“And good morning to you too!” Akko rolled her eyes, but smiled all the same. “I was wondering, do you need help finding the Great Hall for breakfast?”

“Why would we?” Mani asked.

Akko shrugged. “The last couple groups needed it. Come on, follow me!”
Or maybe, Tiffany thought but did not say, they just didn’t have the heart to say no. Yet she was walking behind Akko anyway, as she led them with the enthusiasm of a parade conductor, so apparently Tiff didn’t have the heart either.

“Is the Shooting Star around?” Akko asked, turning a corner. “I was wondering if I’d have a chance to say hi. Not like it would say hi back, but we’ve got a history, y’know?”

“It’s resting in our room. Maybe even brooms need sleep.” Tiff frowned. “You were chosen by the Shooting Star, weren’t you?”

“More or less, but it didn’t stick around for the afterparty. Which is a shame, since it was a really nice afterparty. We had cake! I guess it wasn’t hungry.” Akko chuckled, although Tiff felt like her little joke didn’t even merit a groan. “In any case, I have no idea why it’s so interested in you. Any ideas?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing!” Tiff sighed. “Never mind.”

“Well, I know someone who might know, and she’s basically the smartest and greatest witch of all time… but you’ve got classes first.”

They came to a spiral staircase and descended it. From there, it was only a minute’s brisk walk before they were at the great hall, yet Char was already grumbling behind them about the exertion. Tiff rolled her eyes and strode forward.

A blonde-green-haired witch glanced up as they approached the dining area. “Is that the last of them, Akko?”

“Think so, yeah. Morning, Diana!”

Tiff’s jaw dropped. The image flashed into her head once more: two witches, standing atop the Shooting Star, firing a giant bow at a magical missile. Akko had been one and this—this was the other. “Diana Cavendish,” she muttered.

And then, as Akko leaned in and kissed Diana on the cheek, she wished she hadn’t dropped her jaw all the way to start out. She needed some way to escalate.

“You two—” she stuttered.

“Akko,” Diana said, blushing, “not in front of people, please.”

“Aww, but that’s the best part of dating!” Akko pouted, and then turned to the trio. “May I introduce my lovely girlfriend, Diana.”

Tiffany made up her mind and stuck out her hand. “It’s an honor to meet you, Miss Cavendish. They say you’re the best student in the history of Luna Nova!” Then she squinted: Diana seemed to have mouthed the last few words as Tiff said them. “I suppose you must get that a lot,” Tiff added, grinning nervously.

“Well, it’s true, in fairness.” Diana’s voice was even, without a hint of arrogance. She was stating a fact: no more, no less. Then she smiled, and took Tiff’s outstretched hand. “Well, it was true, once upon a time. It’s very nice to meet you, miss….”

“Tiffany Vandergard!”

“Ah, from the Vandergard family in New York.”
“New Amsterdam,” Tiff muttered before she could stop herself. Char sniggered behind her, and she felt heat rush to her face.

Diana’s polite expression didn’t falter. “Well, I’m sure you know best. I won’t keep you from your meal. Enjoy your first day of classes.” She took Akko’s hand in hers, with the unconscious ease of someone slipping their hand into their pocket, and walked away.

Which meant Tiff didn’t have to maintain her composure. “Cavendish!” she hissed, whipping around to face Char and Mani. “We just met Diana Cavendish! I mean, the family was on the wane in recent years, goodness knows, but she’s brought the name back in a big way!” She heaved a deep breath. “Oh, I think I need to sit down.”

“Cheers to that,” Char said, flopping into a chair at the nearest unoccupied table.

Mani sighed. “I’ll get you two some rolls.”

Tiff just breathed deeply. Diana was something like a household name in the magical community: not only a spellcasting prodigy, but an incredible flier. She’d certainly proved her mettle in the worldwide broadcast on the day of Starfall, deftly maneuvering her broom through a hailstorm of missile-fire. It looked like trying to dodge rain, and she’d come out dry.

Tiff forced another breath, and pulled out her schedule. First up on the list was Magical Astronomy, with… Professor Chariot, of all people. As in, that Chariot. This was going to be one star-studded morning.

“Aw, man,” Char said, glancing at her schedule in turn. “I don’t have any classes with the fish.”

“The fish?”

“Yeah, I don’t know her name.”

“Then how do you know you don’t have any classes with her?”

Char considered this, tapping a finger to her lip. “Good point. Oh, hey,” she added, leaning toward Tiff. “We’ve got most of the same classes. Magic Astronomy, Numerology… oh, this one’s weird.” She tapped the block on her schedule that came after midday break. “What’s Modern Magic, and who’s Professor Croix?”

“I haven’t the faintest.” Croix… the name pinged something in Tiff’s brain, some small cluster of neurons, but nothing came of it.

Mani returned, carrying breakfast for them. Tiff couldn’t help but notice that while Mani had piled her own plate high, she and Char only had a roll and a slice of butter each. “A little unbalanced, don’t you think?” Char asked, eyeing her roll.

“I don’t know what either of you like.” Mani set to cutting up her bacon. “If you’re hungry, go get something yourselves.”

“Fair.” Char shrugged, and went at her roll with gusto. “Rrrrrr,” she said through a mouthful of bread, groaning like a zombie. “Grains.”

Tiff rolled her eyes. Then she glanced up: the eye-roll had caught a flicker of movement near the ceiling.

“Maps here! Getcha maps here! Brawk!”
Mani squeaked and dove under the table at the sudden noise.

It was Akko, of course. She’d metamorphosed into some sort of large bird that Tiff didn’t immediately recognize—possibly an oversized toucan, but most toucans didn’t have bangs—and was flying around the room, dropping leaflets on the students below. Tiffany watched one flutter down to her table: on it was a detailed floorplan of Luna Nova, enchanted with a glowing red dot in the great hall. Tiff frowned, then grabbed the map and waved it around her head a little: the dot jittered accordingly.

Had Akko come up with this enchantment?

“*Atsuko Kagari!*”

Tiff’s head spun around at the harsh sound, which resonated like a gunshot. The teacher it came from seemed to have been *born* at middle-age, she wore it so well. “Need I remind you that there is *no flying* allowed indoors? And that includes under your own power, in case you’re thinking of being clever!”

“Sorry, Professor Finnelan! *Brawk!*” Akko the parrot flapped down toward a table—the one Diana was sitting at, incidentally—and perched upon it. A puff of smoke erupted, and Akko the human was crouched on the table in a similar pose, grinning. Diana rolled her eyes.

“I thought you were making an effort to be more *responsible!*” Professor Finnelan grimaced suddenly—distinct from her earlier frown in its intensity—and clutched her stomach. “*Ugh,* my ulcer is acting up again.”

“Sorry, Professor,” Akko said, a lot more contritely. “Do you need anything?”

“I need you to get off that table!”

Tiffany turned away and attacked her breakfast. *This* was the witch she’d thought was the greatest she’d ever seen? A girl who couldn’t go five minutes without getting in trouble at school, and saw nothing wrong with waiting outside a bedroom shapeshifted into a mouse.

A witch like that couldn’t *possibly* be the greatest ever, could she?

“Welcome, to the—of—nomy!”

The redheaded teacher winced. She detached a microphone from the neckline of her dress, turned a little dial on it, and spoke into it once more. “*WELCOME, TO THE WORLD OF ASTRONOMY!*”

Tiff and the rest of the class covered their ears at the shriek of feedback. Grimacing, the teacher took the microphone and tossed it on the floor to her side, producing another bunch of dull thuds from unseen speakers. “Well, I’ll have to talk to Professor Croix about this microphone experiment of hers, but in the meantime, I’ll just project my voice like normal. Welcome, to the world of…. *She* sighed. “Oh, you know.”

Tiff squinted. The teacher had introduced herself as Chariot, and her hair was the right color, but… apart from that, she couldn’t imagine anyone being more opposite. *Shiny* Chariot was as eye-grabbing as a fireworks show, whereas *Professor* Chariot was as eye-grabbing as a slow-motion car crash.

_Maybe there’s a potion she drinks, like Dr. Jekyll,* Tiff mused. _Maybe she actually transforms for the show. Maybe she has a twin._
“So!” Professor Chariot said, smiling nervously. This seemed to be the only way she could do anything. “Obviously, before you can do Magical Astronomy, you’ll have to master the basics of plain old, boring, Astronomy. Except it’s not boring!” she added, quickly, as if someone was about to give up on the class right then. “It’s very interesting, or at least I’ll do my best to make it as interesting as it should be. As it is!”

Char was wincing beside her. It was a long, slow wince, and it seemed Char was willing to draw it out all class long. “Self esteem issues, much?” she whispered.

Tiff grumbled to herself as Professor Chariot waved a wand, and sheets of paper flew out from her desk among the students. As they landed on the desks, Tiffany saw they were worksheets. “So let’s start by, um… filling these out! Just as well as you can, so I can get a sense of the class’s aptitude.” Chariot was tapping her fingers together. “You have fifteen minutes, feel free to start.”

Planets, and a star chart for naming constellations. The planets were a cakewalk, and although she wasn’t a hundred percent certain about the constellations, she was pretty sure about half of them and reasonably confident in her guesses for the others. She sighed and flipped her paper over after only about five minutes, then reclined in her chair.

Nothing quite like a pop quiz at the beginning of class to make astronomy “interesting”.

After ten tedious minutes, a bell rang. “All right, time’s up.” Chariot said, and waved her wand. The worksheets flew her way. “And, just remember, this isn’t being graded,” she said, glancing at them as they approached. “It’s just my way of gauging where the class is with respect to knowing their cosmology.”

“Wasn’t done,” Char muttered, slouching over her desk.

The papers shuffled, floating, in front of Chariot. Her frown grew frownier with each one. “Mmm. Some standouts, but….” She shook her head. “Could you all do something else for me? Close your eyes.”

Tiffany closed hers dutifully, but squinted even so under her eyelids.

“Raise your hand if you’re from a non-magical family, or if you didn’t have magic until very recently.”

Around Tiffany, she heard the sound of many hands being raised. It sounded like more than half the class.

“That makes sense. Drop your hands, and open your eyes.” Tiff opened hers to see Chariot smiling. “Well, it’s quite all right if you don’t know the constellations already. This is a school, after all!” She chuckled, and some of the students chuckled back, but without humor in their voices. Tiffany glanced around, and saw… well, it was like what she’d seen in her dorm, now that she was paying attention. The students all looked proper enough on the surface, but there were signs. Subtle slips in presentation, in how they wore their robes or carried themselves. There were a lot of newbies here.

“Not to mention, some of my greatest students started from the bottom,” Chariot continued. She tapped a piece of chalk with her wand, and it flew into the air and started sketching out a rough Copernican system. “So we’ll begin by going over the planets!”

Tiff suppressed a groan. If there was any way to make non-magical astronomy fun and interesting, then she was sure that spending a week recapping “Baby’s First Solar System” was not it.
It was going to be a long forty-five minutes.

Tiff snorted. “I still think it’s her twin, or something. No way was that Shiny Chariot.”

She trudged along the hallway. Mani and Char were in tow behind her. “I thought she was nice.” Mani said, “and she’s definitely a pretty good teacher—”

“In what universe?” Tiff rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe there’s people in that class who don’t know the planets. And she’s accommodating them!”

Char cleared her throat with a meaningful look. Tiffany stared at her. “Oh, not you too.”

“I forgot whether Pluto is one or not, okay? Cut me some slack.”

“Pluto is absolutely a planet,” Tiff said.

Mani raised her eyebrow. “Are you sure? I’m pretty sure it isn’t anymore….”

“Maybe to non-witches it isn’t, but in magical circles Pluto is still the ninth planet!”

“There are actually multiple schools of thought about the subject,” a fourth voice cut in. Tiffany glanced to her right, saw Diana walking next to them, and tried not to vibrate with excitement. Diana didn’t glance at them, just kept power-walking forward with the gait of someone with somewhere to be.

Tiffany had somewhere to be, too: wherever Diana was going. She hurried forward as Diana continued, “Since the non-magical International Astronomical Union decided it wasn’t a planet, and discovered multiple objects in the solar system with similar mass, a number of different astrological factions have emerged.”

She smiled as Tiff stared, looking at her for the first time. “Sorry to butt in, but your discussion was interesting. Might I recommend ‘The Case for Eris’ as a treatise about the ongoing debate on the matter? I know the library has a copy.”

“Thank you,” Tiff breathed.

“Not a problem. Enjoy your day.” With another flashed smile, she turned down a corner. Tiff stopped at the implied dismissal and watched her leave. The girl was the definition of grace, the personification of poise, the….

“Hey, Tiff. You’re kinda standing in the middle of the hallway.”

Tiffany blinked, and glanced behind her to see the myriad students she was blocking from walking through the intersection. She blushed and hurried forward.

“These are the lunar runes which have been used by witches since ancient times.” Professor Finnelan waved her wand, and row upon row of runes appeared on the blackboard behind her. “Can anyone here read the segmental script?”

Tiffany squinted. She was sure she’d seen this somewhere before, but… maybe if she had some time….
“Anyone? No?” Professor Finnelan sighed, and recited, “‘Bless the one who lets this stone remain untouched. Woe betide the one who moves it.’ It’s the inscription on the tomb of Scarlette, the Fourth Olde Witch.” Finnelan frowned. “I suppose we can’t have a Diana every year.”

“Of course Diana got it,” Tiff whispered, staring.

“Of course,” Char repeated with a yawn. “Little miss perfect.”

“She’s taller than you.”

“Big miss perfect.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being perfect. In fact, by definition—”

“Miss Vandergard and Miss Jones!” Finnelan’s voice was startling, like being interrupted by a fire alarm. “Feel free to continue your discussion after class, but here, we learn.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Tiff declared, and with a sharp nod she got back to her notes. This was exactly right. This was exactly what a professor should be. No guff, no chatter, just leadership.

“I like Chariot better.”

“What?” Tiff dropped her fork just as she was about to start eating, and glared at Char, who was leaning in her chair with her legs on the table. “She’s only better at stuttering! Professor Finnelan has all the competency Chariot lacks.”

“And she’s boring,” Char said, yawning halfway through.

“She’s direct! The subject itself is interesting! And get your feet off the table!”

“Chariot tries, though.”

“Tries and fails.” Tiff turned to face Mani. “Back me up on this, okay? Chariot’s a decent entertainer, I’ll grant her that, but who decided she ought to be a teacher?”

“I… think they both have their strong points?” Tiff hadn’t noticed before, but it was obvious now: Mani was squirming in her chair. “I wouldn’t say one is… better than the other, but….”

“All right, Mani?” Char leaned forward. “This isn’t that painful an argument, right?”

“No, it’s… I have to….” She grimaced. “How do I put this… let off some pressure?”

“‘Let off some pressure’?” Char snorted. “You don’t need a euphemism. It’s okay. Everyone pees.”

“That’s not what I—”

“Everyone also poops. Just… go to the bathroom.”

“But, I….” Mani sucked in a breath. “Okay, fine.”

She stood up, pushed her chair in, and hurriedly walked off: the kind of walk used by every child at the pool who’d just been yelled at not to run by a lifeguard.

“In any case,” Tiffany said, picking her fork back up, “I can say with confidence that Chariot is the
worse teacher of the two. Possibly the worst teacher at the school, and if this is what we can expect from her, then I hope to have as little to do with Professor Chariot as possible.”

“Hi, Tiff! Come with me, we’re gonna see Professor Chariot!”

Tiffany looked up and saw Akko standing over her. “Gah!” she said, bolting to her feet. On the upside, Akko wasn’t a crocodile or a monkey or anything this time, but that didn’t excuse the definite downside of her being in Tiff’s personal bubble. “Don’t you have to go show some newbies how to tie their shoes, or something?” Tiff asked, backing away toward the table.

“Oh, tutoring? Diana’s actually helping a couple of students out. They seemed really excited to talk to her!” She smiled, took Tiff’s hand. “But I’ve gotta get you to Professor Chariot, pronto!”

“What?”

“And bring your new broom!”

“What?”

Tiff was helpless as Akko dragged her out of the dining hall.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: in many ways, this "episode" exists just to house the scene at the start of this chapter, the one with Chariot and Croix. Seriously, it was such a fun scene to write (and, hopefully, such a good scene) that I needed somewhere to put it. Hence, a chapter or two to focus on these two giants of Luna Nova Academy.
“Professor Chariot! We need to talk to you!”

Akko kept hammering away at the office door, to the point that Tiff wasn’t sure whether she meant to knock on it or break it down. Tiff, for her part, hung back a few steps—maybe passers-by wouldn’t think they were together—and held the Shooting Star in one hand. It had twitched a few times as they ascended the steps to Chariot’s room in the tower, but hadn’t moved much more than that.

Finally, Chariot’s voice called from inside, “Come in, Akko!”

Akko opened the door to reveal a vastly disorganized study. Books were scattered everywhere, the rug was clearly discolored, and a ratty old bird snoozed in one corner. If Tiff had ever let her room get this messy, her parents would have grounded her for a week.

Professor Chariot seemed to be on the tail end of a conversation with—and here, Tiffany had to blink a few times to be sure her eyes were working—a tall, translucent witch chugging from a heavy duty thermos, standing atop a red disk. Chariot glanced toward Akko and Tiffany, flashed them a smile, then turned back to her previous guest. “Sorry about this, Croix,” she said, “but it looks like duty calls. Another time?”

The witch named Croix gulped and nodded. “Another time. See you later, Chariot…. Akko.” She nodded in Akko’s direction, looking more than a little uncomfortable. Then, without fanfare, she disappeared into thin air. The disk scooted under Chariot’s desk and out of sight.

“Oh. Hi, Professor Chariot!” Akko said, all smiles again, as Tiff stared. Not even a puff of smoke—just gone, like she hadn’t been there in the first place. Was this what Mani and Char had called a ‘hologram’? “What were you two talking about?”

“Just chatting over lunch,” Chariot said. Indeed, there was a plate with silverware on her desk, and a half-finished roast chicken thigh upon the plate. “What brings you here on your first day back? And I believe I recognize you from earlier today,” she added, smiling at Tiffany. “You did quite well on the astronomy quiz.”

“I’m here to introduce her!” Akko jumped to the side and waved her hands at Tiff. “This is Tiff Vandergard! She’s a new witch here from New York—”

“—New Amsterdam—”

“—no one calls it that—and she’s got a new broom I figured you might wanna see! Well, okay, not a new broom exactly, but…..”

Chariot’s eyes widened. “Is that… the Shooting Star?”

Tiff sighed and walked forward, holding the broom in both hands. Tenderly, as if holding the Mona Lisa—except that that wasn't quite right: Tiff knew she would eat pizza off the Mona Lisa before allowing the Shooting Star to be damaged. Chariot scrutinized it, holding her hands close to its shaft but not daring to touch. “How did you find it?” she asked, looking up at last.

Akko grimaced brightly. “Well, we kinda took a detour into the forest yesterday, had some misadventures, found a magical artifact. You know the drill... actually,” she said, glancing over and seeing Tiff’s withering stare, “I should let Tiff tell it.”
“Thank you.” Tiff scratched her neck. “I suppose I’m not certain. I was being attacked by mandrakes in the forest, and I’d lost my wand, and I was trying to fight them off, and… it came and saved me. And it’s still here, which I understand is unusual?”

“Quite unusual… at least, based on our admittedly small sample size.” Chariot frowned at the broom, then looked up at Akko. “So, Akko, why did you want me to see it?”

“Um… because you’re the expert in ancient magical destiny artifacts?”

Chariot winced. “Oh. Oh, I’m so sorry, that’s not….” She sighed. “Akko, I knew so much about the Shiny Rod—the Claiomh Solais, if you’re curious,” she added, glancing at Tiff, “because it was mine. I’m not a generalist.”

Akko’s face fell. It put Tiff in mind of a deflating moonbounce.

“Not that I can’t look it up,” Chariot added hurriedly, “and I will, the next time I can find the time! But… I’m sorry, Akko. I might not be as much help here as you hoped.”

“Oh, uh… that’s okay!” Akko perked up almost immediately. “Thanks anyway, Professor! Let us know if you find out anything!”

“I’ll be sure to.” Chariot stood and offered her hand to Tiff. “It’s a pleasure to meet more formally.”

Tiffany took Chariot’s hand and shook it: at least her grip was firm. “Likewise,” she said, regardless of her actual feelings.

Akko clutched her hands together as soon as they’d left the room. “Isn’t she amazing?”

Then a bell rang. Tiffany squinted. “Did you just waste my entire lunch break?”

Five minutes later, Chariot heard a telltale hammering on her door again. “Akko,” she called out without looking around, “you’re going to be late for class!”

“It’s important!”

Chariot sighed and swiveled in her chair. “Come in.”

Akko burst through the door and shouted, “I used a Word!”

Chariot frowned.

“I mean—” Akko took a deep breath and continued, “I mean, like, a Word. Capital W. Just like last year. Noctu orfei and the rest.”

“Oh. Oh!” Chariot put her hand over her mouth. “You did appear from a glowing green portal, which I suppose I should have thought about if I wasn’t….”

“Worrying about your performance?” Akko smiled disarmingly.

“Anyway.” Chariot took a breath before continuing. “The Shiny Rod hasn’t reappeared, has it?” When Akko shook her head, Chariot frowned. “Then… when I said the Word in my performance last night, that was just stage trickery. But you used it for real. How?”

“I just….” Akko’s face was screwed up in concentration. “It felt right, you know? Like the other
times when the Words came to me, it felt right to use it right there and then.” She groaned. “It’s so confusing. Not that I’m complaining!—but why can I use the words again?”

The bell rang for the second time. Akko froze. “Oh. Whoops.”

“You’d better get going,” Chariot said needlessly, as Akko turned tail and bolted out the door. Chariot chuckled to herself, but only briefly.

*The Words didn’t disappear with the Claimh Solais.*

Chariot frowned and leaned her elbows on her desk.

*They were here in the first place for a purpose—to unlock the Grand Triskelion. And if they can still be used, even without the Shiny Rod… maybe their purpose isn’t yet finished.*

She groaned. This was going to require a *lot* of research.

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Tiff’s stomach was growling. To her left, Mani squirmed. “Nervous in the bathroom, huh?” Char said.

“Shut up,” Mani muttered.

The bell for the start of class had rung, and no teacher was present, unless the short dark-haired girl leaning against the wall was the teacher—but she looked young enough to be a student. However, before long, a red disk glided out from under the teacher’s desk. Then another eight. Then another sixteen, forming a five-by-five grid.

*“Welcome to the new world of magic.”*

The voice was disembodied and commanding. The lights in the room dimmed, but new lights bloomed from the disks on the floor: a wide pillar, which resolved into a fifteen foot tall female shape. People gasped.

Far from the usual teacher’s robes and hat, she wore a billowing red cloak and had unruly, light-purple hair without anything covering it. Add to that her tanned skin, and Tiffany couldn’t help but wonder whether this was a teacher, or some sort of post-apocalyptic cosplayer—until she felt a start of recognition. This was the witch Chariot had been speaking to.

“My name is Professor Croix,” she said, “and it’s a pleasure to be here… or that’s what I would say.”

The image flickered and disappeared.

“If I were here.”

Tiffany whirled around in her seat, seeing the professor up at the back of the class, her image projected by another disk. Little murmurs and gasps sprung up from the class as Croix, with one hand on her hip, floated down toward the front of the room again. “As you can see from this hologram, though, I’m not here at all. In fact, I’m in the Arabian peninsula, in the middle of a vast desert. Would you like to see it?”

There were no murmurs this time. Croix’s disks arrayed themselves around the walls of the classroom and glowed—and the standard Luna Nova lecture hall, flat at the front and with steadily rising seats in the rear, was replaced by an Arabian dune. The floor under Croix’s desk turned to
sand, and the walls disappeared, replaced by vast cloudless sky, bleached blue and seemingly infinite, holding nothing but the punishing afternoon sun. Only the exit door remained: incongruous as it was, it only highlighted the majesty of the situation.

No, there were no murmurs. Only slack-jawed gasps, and applause. Tiffany joined in both.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” said Professor Croix. “Please, take a look around. I spent hours scouting out a location with a good view.” No longer confined to her disk, she strode across the simulated desert and leaned casually on the desk, as if she were there. And it was very hard to discern that she wasn’t. Tiffany saw: she was very slightly translucent, as were the sand and the sky. If she squinted, she could barely make out the walls of the classroom.

But if she didn’t squint… Tiff reached down, scooping up some virtual sand, and it actually rose in her hand. She splayed her fingers, letting it trickle out, and fancied she could feel it running against her skin. She found herself sweating under the oppressive heat of the sun, and in fact had to cover her eyes as she looked behind herself to see it, lest it should blind her.

And Tiffany wasn’t the only one looking. All around her, the other students were playing with the sand, and shielding their eyes from the sun, and staring at the scenery. The only one who seemed unimpressed was the short, dark-haired girl at the front, who was still leaning against the wall despite its apparent disappearance. As Tiffany watched, she rolled her eyes and fidgeted with the large red bow in her hair.

“So, first question for the class.” Professor Croix was smiling, like she’d told the world’s best joke and was waiting for them to get it. “How did I do all this?”

The class’s attention was on her once more, but no one raised any hands for several seconds. “Any takers?” Croix prompted.

A tan-skinned witch behind Tiffany stood up and called out, “Magic!” The class laughed, but she didn’t flinch or wince or make any show of embarrassment.

Croix laughed too, and a bit haughtily. “Miss… Lopez, correct? If we answered every question at Luna Nova with ‘magic’, even if the answer was technically correct, I doubt we’d learn very much. Especially since, in this case, it isn’t the correct answer. Not entirely, anyway….” She trailed off enticingly, daring someone to continue.

Char flopped her hand up, then let it fall against the desk again. “You’re using technology too, isn’t that it?”

“Now that’s more like it, Miss Jones.” Croix smiled. “Of course, technology alone can’t produce this kind of hologram. Magic alone might be able to, for a split second, but an illusion of this scale, for this duration, requires….” She grimaced, her cool air of charisma flickering for a moment. “Unconscionable amounts of power.”

That was a weird word choice, Tiffany thought.

“And yet here you are, in the desert of Arabia. How?” Croix grinned, and there was that charisma again, the kind that made her the most eye-catching thing in this room of wonders. “Because we have magic, to provide the ability that technology needs—and we have technology, to provide the efficiency that magic lacks. That, my students, is the power of—!”

A pointer materialized in her hand, and she rapped it against the blackboard behind her, which materialized just in time to be struck. Words shimmered into existence on the board as she said
Tiffany couldn’t help herself. She applauded again, bolting to her feet and clapping as loudly as she could. It took a few seconds to notice that no one else was clapping as hard as she was. Once she noticed, her hands slowed to a halt, and she slowly sat back down.

“First of all comes our syllabus. If you could just pass that out, please, Constanze? She’ll be your very capable TA for the year.” At this cue, the short witch with the bow stepped up and grabbed a stack of papers from the desk, then walked up the dune—the stairs, almost concealed by the dune, Tiff reminded herself—and thrust a sheaf at each row.

“First on our agenda,” Croix continued, as Tiff received her syllabus, “will be a crash course in the basics of electricity and circuits: most of you are probably familiar with magic, but the modern part of the course is likely new to you. Once we’ve mastered that, we can move on to how it’s applied to spellcraft….”

“That was freaking ace,” Char breathed, as the trio walked away from the Modern Magic classroom.

The departing students around them were chattering so much that the words faded into a sort of white noise. The word “Croix” kept popping up, though.

“I take back what I said earlier,” Tiffany said.

“About what?” Mani said. She wore a pained expression once more: whatever she’d forgotten about during Modern Magic, it had come back to her.

“I said Chariot was a decent entertainer. But after this?” Tiff laughed. “That was the most incredible illusion I’ve ever seen! Not flashy, not garish, just beautiful. Croix blows Chariot out of the water!”

“I suppose I should say thank you.”

Tiffany jumped back. Another of Croix’s disks was scooting along the wall next to her. From it projected a miniature image of Croix. “Sorry,” she said, “eavesdropping is a bad habit of mine. Always nosing in on things I shouldn’t—but what were you saying about Professor Chariot?”

“Oh, that you’re way better than she is.” Tiffany smiled. “And, to be quite honest, I’m not sure what value she provides to this school as a teacher.”

“Mate.” Char tapped her on the shoulder. “That’s harsh.”

“Ahem.” Croix was smiling in a thin-lipped kind of way. Her disk slid down the wall and onto the floor, and her hologram grew to full height. “I know that my colleague can be… easy to get the wrong impression of. So let me offer some advice to help you on your educational journey.” Her eyes narrowed, and suddenly Tiff felt like an experiment that had produced a null result. Something about the way Croix looked at her, as if through a microscope, with the faintest of frowns on her face. “Never underestimate Chariot du Nord.”

Tiffany put her hands on her hips. “And how would that help my education?”

“Because Professor Chariot is one of the greatest and most influential witches who has ever lived,”
Croix said, her tone utterly flat as she leaned over Tiffany, “and the sooner you realize how lucky you are to have her as your teacher, the sooner you stand to benefit from your extraordinary good fortune.”

It was the same way Diana Cavendish had described herself earlier that day: not an opinion but a fact. This time, it was harder to credit. “She’s a talented illusionist,” Tiffany said, squinting, “but you just blew her out of—”

“How do you think I was able to do what I’ve just done? By building on her work.” Croix rolled her eyes. “Kids these days. Not appreciating the classics.” Then she looked past Tiff and frowned. “Miss… Kairouani, is that right? Are you feeling okay?”

Mani’s teeth were clenched. “I’m fine,” she said, a lie that couldn’t have fooled a five-year-old.

“Mani,” Tiff said, “what’s wrong? Is it really trouble with your…. …” She trailed off, but motioned with her head in the general direction of Mani’s digestive tract. However, Mani shook her head sharply. “Then what is—”

Char burst out into guffaws. “What?” Tiff said.

“I just got it,” Char gasped. “Modern witch. Rides the modern version of a broom.” She gestured at the disk under Croix’s feet. “She’s riding a roomba! It’s a roomba! This is the greatest thing ever!”

Professor Croix frowned deeper. “I’m… not sure if I understand.” But Char just kept laughing.

“We’re going to be late,” Tiff muttered, and grabbed Char. “Have an excellent day, Professor,” she said perfunctorily, and hurried along the corridor.

“You as well, Miss… Vandergard. And mind my advice.”

“Did you not do that on purpose!?” Char howled, as she was dragged away.

“Mind my advice,” Tiff muttered under her breath. Which was hard to do, since her breaths had to be pretty low themselves: Professor Lukić’s classroom was filling up with noxious fumes as she stirred her cauldron, and Tiff found herself breathing through her shirtsleeve. If the Professor had ever heard of lab safety, perhaps she’d thought it had been some passing fad. Maybe she’d thought the same of hygiene.

“Potions and poisons, poisons and potions,” the crone cackled. “If you don’t concentrate hard enough while brewing, dear students of mine, one may very well become the other! We potion-makers dance on the knife-edge between life and death, soaring potential and cold hard reality….”

Impressive-sounding boilerplate. Tiffany squinted, and not just because the gases were irritating her eyes.

Why would Croix defend Chariot?

“Ow, my organs,” Char said, flapping her hand around in an attempt to dispel the gases encroaching upon her. Mani wasn’t even trying, though: she was just turning green as they wafted over her. She was still trembling, glancing around the room as if searching for escape routes.

“So, let us begin. The cauldron has boiled enough, and we are ready for the infusion of—”

“I have to go!” Mani yelled, and stood up. With something between a sprint and a hobble, she ran
down the stairs and out of the room. Apparently she had been looking for escape routes.

“—pickled garlic,” Professor Lukić continued as if nothing had happened. “Just a pinch will do, of course, and then after that….”

Tiff nudged Char. “I’m not sure she’s okay.”

“Course she ain’t.” Char shrugged. “If she’d just gone at lunch she’d be fine.”

There was a long pause, filled only by the droning of Lukić and the bubbling of her cauldron. Then Tiff spoke up again. “Don’t you think we should—”

“No. I don’t think we can help her.” Char frowned. “Or if we can help, I really don’t want to.”

“Don’t be crude.” Tiff shot Char a glare. Then her eyes widened.

Through the window, just barely visible behind the classroom’s noxious fumes, there was a witch sprinting out onto the grounds. And unless Tiff’s eyes were deceiving her—which was, to be fair, a very real possibility—that witch was Mani.

Tiff squinted, then glanced at the Professor, but she seemed determined to continue her lesson no matter what happened. So Tiff stood up and strode to the window, peering through it.

That was definitely Mani running across the grounds. She kept glancing back at the school, and redoubling her pace each time she did. Sweat beaded on her face, visible even from this distance.

“We need to go,” Tiff said, and grabbed Char’s arm.

“Mate?”

Tiff turned to the front of the room and declared, “Professor Lukić? Please excuse us.”

“You’re excused—now add this leaf of wormwood, crushed and dissolved, to produce the effect we desire….”

She didn’t even pause, and her eyes remained fixed upon the cauldron. Tiff supposed she had to have tenure.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Char said, as Tiff dragged her from the room.

“Something’s wrong with Mani,” Tiff hissed. “And don’t say it’s constipation. I just saw her run outside. Unless you think she’s trying to find the outhouse?”

“I dunno. She’s from Tunisia, maybe they use them—”

“Not funny. Where are the stairs?”

Tiffany sprinted down the corridor, Char in tow, looking around for any evidence of a stairwell. Then she looked up and noticed two things. One of them was that Professor Chariot was walking down the hallway in front of her, carrying a load of textbooks and conversing with Diana Cavendish. The other was that Tiffany wouldn’t be able to stop in time. “Sorry!” Tiffany yelped, frantically trying to halt her momentum.

“Mm?” Chariot glanced up from her conversation, and her eyes had time to widen before Tiffany slammed into her. Tiff hit the floor hard, expecting to hear the thuds of textbooks hitting the floor all around her like giant hailstones. However, when she looked up, Chariot hadn’t fallen or dropped
“Can I help you?” she asked. “And shouldn’t you be in—”

“Where are the stairs?” Tiff scrambled to her feet. “We need to find our friend Mani, it’s important!”

“Er… keep going and take a left, but what’s so important that you should skip—”

“Thank you! Sorry about the collision!” Tiff grabbed Char again and sprinted.

“Where are you going? Hey!”

What an odd question to ask, Tiff thought, after Chariot had just told them where to go. Then she winced. The adrenaline was wearing off, and she was feeling the impact of having run into Chariot. For some reason, it felt like she’d run into a brick wall.

“Mani!”

It had taken another minute to exit the building, and another five to find Mani on the grounds, but they’d done it. Mani turned around as Tiff called out again, “Mani!”


“Stay back!” Mani’s voice was pained. She was posed in an awkward half-crouch, and had her wand out thrust at the sky. She flicked it upward a few times, breathing hard each time, and nothing happened. “Pharus, come on, pharus—it’s not… coming out. I waited too long!”

“Are you… sure it’s not the bathroom problem?”

“Shut up!” Mani took in a shuddering breath. “And run.”

“Mani, what’s wrong?”

“Too much magic,” she grunted. “Not just a static amount. It’s always building up, and if I don’t—if I don’t find an outlet—” She gasped. Her wand was glowing, vibrating. “Get away!” she yelled, brandishing it.

Tiff had seen what the business end of that wand could do. “Come on!” she said, grabbing Char’s hand again and backing up.

Sparks flew from the wood. Now Char was backing up under her own power. Mani took a deep breath, looked up, and mouthed, “I’m sorry.”

Her wand glowed with a blinding light, and then something slammed into Tiffany’s stomach. A moment later, she heard the explosion.

Then she just heard ringing, and saw nothing but black. A moment later, her sense of touch caught up and told her she’d been knocked prone, and the feeling on her face was dirt. She shoved herself up and saw a crater in front of her, and Char on the ground to her left. Her breath caught. “Mani!” she shouted, with a voice she couldn’t hear.

But Mani was still standing, still holding her wand—barely. Jets of light kept blasting out of it, and the jets kept exploding either when they struck a solid surface, or a few meters away if they were flying into the air. Between the recoil and the shockwaves, Mani wasn’t able to keep control of her wand. Her arm whipped around like a cat toy as magic flew in every direction, and the pain on her face was obvious.
“Mani!” Tiffany yelled, barely able to hear herself over the tumult. She tried to run forward, but her stomach struck something yet again. She looked down and saw the Shooting Star hovering at just above waist height, blocking her as she tried to run. “Let me go!” she yelled, but the Star was as firm as an iron railing in front of her.

“What’s going on?”

The voice was faintly audible under the explosions and through the ringing in Tiffany’s ears. Tiff forced her head around and saw Diana, who must have followed them. She looked somewhat out of breath. Behind her, Chariot was running as well, though quite a bit further back. “What is she doing?” Diana said, pulling out her wand and brandishing it.

“Diana!” Tiffany gasped: she’d have sighed with relief if she could spare the breath. “Mani’s got too much magic, she can’t control it! She’s going to hurt herself! Do something!”

“All right.” Diana took a breath and strode forward. “Obviously, the first step will be to contain her, so she can’t do any damage to the school or herself. I’ll start with a shield spell.”

“Yes—wait, no!” Tiffany stretched out an impotent hand. “Containing it has been the whole problem! She needs to let it out!”

She tried to run forward at Diana, but the Star still held her back. “Please stay out of the way,” Diana said, flicking her wand to the side in preparation. “I don’t want you to get—”

Mani’s wand sent off another explosion. The explosion struck the ground and blasted a shower of rocks into the air, and one of those rocks struck Diana right between the eyes. She went down like a sack of bricks.

Tiffany gawped. Diana Cavendish, greatest witch at Luna Nova, had just been KO’d by a pebble.

“Get down.”

Then she felt a hand on her shoulder, pushing her firmly to the ground. She looked up and saw Chariot standing firm. “Chariot,” Tiff said.

“Please look after Diana for me.”

And then she was off, striding toward Mani. “You can’t!” Tiff said, reaching toward her. “Mani’s too dangerous, she’s going to—”

Mani’s wand twitched and then blasted again, sending an explosion right at Chariot. It happened too fast for Tiff to even close her eyes: the blast shot toward her—

And Chariot deflected it with a flick of her wand. The motion was almost offhanded.

Tiffany stared.

“Imani, right? Imani bint Abdallah al Kairouani.”

The witch’s voice was calm, measured. Like she was walking through a tranquil garden. “If I’ve heard correctly, your friends call you Mani.”
“Please,” Mani gasped. Her arm was worn out: it was all she could do to hold onto the wand, as the magic boiled inside her. She felt like the proverbial teapot, holding a tempest. Ready to blow her lid at any time.

Her wand was pointed at Chariot. It fired.

Chariot deflected the blast with casual ease.

“What,” Mani said, and then Chariot surged forward and grabbed her wrist, and held her hand toward the sky.

“Is it okay if I call you Mani too?” she asked, smiling. Her eyes were a warm red behind her glasses. “If I understand correctly, you’ve got some magic you need to vent.”

“It’s too much,” Mani gasped, feeling the power lance along her arm again. Her wand fired another blast. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be here—I’m just messing everything up.”

“Then I guess we’d better find a good use for all that magic.” Mani could feel her own breaths slowing down as Chariot spoke, her voice as soft as her grip on Mani’s wrist was firm. “Repeat after me, Imani. Bella vida.”

“I can’t cast anything,” Mani said, “it just comes out as explosions—”

“Trust me. Bella vida.”

“Bella vida?” Mani said.

“On three, cast it with me. One, two—”

“Bella vida!” they both yelled.

And abruptly, Mani felt like the stopper had been pulled off. She yelped as all the magic in her body surged up her arm and through her wand, into a jet of green light that surged skyward. It flew for five long seconds, and then—

Red exploded across the sky. Red, and then yellow, and the rest of the spectrum forming a beautiful rainbow of fireworks, filling Mani’s whole field of vision, as though the sun were peeking out after the world’s worst storm. The fireworks thundered in her ears, as loud as her earlier explosions had been, but after it was done and the last embers glittered their way out of the sky… silence.

Mani’s legs trembled beneath her, and she would have collapsed if Chariot didn’t bend down right then and pick her up in both arms. “It’s okay,” Chariot murmured, as Mani’s vision swam. “It’s okay, you’re safe now.”

Mani closed her eyes, and felt a sensation of movement. It seemed Chariot was carrying her back to the building. That was nice: she didn’t feel up to walking there on her own.

“Diana,” said Chariot, “are you all right?”

“Yes, I think so,” said a shaky voice, and Mani heard the rustling sounds of someone getting to her feet. “I was caught off guard, that’s all.”

“Miss al Kairouani!”

This was the strident voice of Professor Finnelan. With dread brewing in her stomach, Mani
cracked open her eye. “You have damaged the school grounds and disrupted classes with your actions,” Finnelan declared, and indeed there was a flood of students coming out of the school behind her. Mani wondered how much of the show they’d seen. “Would you mind explaining yourself?”

Mani tired to say something, but the words didn’t come.

“No? Then for this, the punishment will be—” And then, Professor Finnelan looked at Chariot. Her expression paled. “None. There will be… no punishment.” She backed away sheepishly.

Mani glanced up, just in time to see Chariot with an expression in her eyes like a loaded gun. Then it faded as soon as she looked back down at Mani, to be replaced with that comforting warmth. “No punishment?” Mani asked. “But I could have hurt someone. I did hurt someone.”

“Let’s talk, first.” Chariot sighed. “Why did this happen?”

“I—ever since Starfall, I’ve had too much magic. It builds up if I can’t vent it off, a-and—”

Mani stammered herself into silence. Chariot just nodded. “I see,” she said. “This school’s had some troubles in the past with meeting the needs of our more unique students, so I’m not sure if there’s much we could have done… but I really wish you’d told someone.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’ll figure out a way you can safely vent your magic. And in return,” Chariot said, her voice taking on a harder edge, “if this ever happens again, there will be consequences.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mani said without thinking about it. She wiggled her legs, feeling some strength in them again. “Can you let me down now? I think I can walk.”

Chariot bent down and set her on the ground. Mani took a few stumbling steps away, and got a good look at Chariot. She hadn’t realized before, but Chariot’s hair-tie seemed to have been blown off, letting her long red hair hang loosely behind her.

“You really are her, aren’t you,” Mani mumbled. “You’re the Shiny Chariot.”

Chariot smiled.

“I watched your show, you know.”

The smile vanished. “Oh, um. You did?”

“Yeah. Not live,” she added, and for some reason Chariot’s body seemed to be sagging, as if with relief. Mani frowned, but kept going: “I don’t think you ever did a show in Tunisia, but I watched tapes and DVDs. You were amazing. I couldn’t use magic back then, but I thought that if I ever was able to, you were the kind of witch I’d want to be.” Mani looked down at the ground. “But look at me. How could I ever be a great witch like this?”

“I am looking at you.” Chariot’s hand rested on her shoulder. “And do you want to guess what I see?”

“A walking disaster?”

“A witch who looks a lot like I once did.”

Mani looked up, startled. Chariot chuckled. “If you watched my old videos, then you remember my
“Catchphrase, right?”

“Um… a believing heart is your magic?”

“That’s right. I know it sounds pretty lame, but… I was always making mistakes when I started out. I got some people pretty upset, and I wondered if I’d ever be a great witch at all. But if you believe in yourself, and keep working hard….” Chariot’s eyes twinkled behind her glasses. “You’re going to be an amazing witch, Imani. As long as you believe.”

Mani felt herself smiling. “Call me Mani.”

The three of them sat in their dorm room. Mani was holding what looked like a magic eight ball, but it was something Chariot had given her. “Watch this,” she said, and shoved her wand into it. “Pharus!”

There was the sound of an explosion, but quiet. Like something heard through someone else’s headphones.

“I can use this!” Mani said excitedly. “It’s got some kind of anti-magic rock in it, and I can vent magic into it so I don’t ever have to have an outburst again!”

An anti-magic eight ball, then. “But what if you lose it?” Tiff said from her bunk. “Isn’t this a bandaid solution?”

“Tiff, mate,” Char said below her. “Don’t spoil this.”

Tiff groaned.

“Professor Chariot is amazing, isn’t she?” Mani said, leaning back on her bed, eyes shining. “She said I can be a witch.”

No, she wasn’t, Tiff wanted to blurt out. Chariot was a nervous wreck who couldn’t even conduct a class without getting flustered. And yet she’d seen Chariot walk into an explosion hazard without flinching.

Maybe she did have a twin.

Tiffany groaned.

“Whoa, Mani,” Char said below her, “those are some pretty gnarly bandages.”

Tiff looked up and saw Mani with her wand arm extended, a wrap of bandages visible under her sleeve. “Oh, yeah. Chariot took me to the hospital wing, because my arm got kind of messed up with all the magic. It’s okay, I can take them off tomorrow!”

“That’s good.”

“It is!” Mani frowned. “I’m glad I didn’t have to stay overnight or anything. There was a girl in one of the beds there, and she didn’t look too happy.”

Tiffany bolted upright, slamming her head into the ceiling. “Ow—what? Who was it?”

“I don’t know. She was really pale… short black hair.”

Tiff’s eyes widened. She’d completely forgotten, with everything else happening that day.
Alice.
Six years ago.

Sagging birthday balloons tied to a hospital bed.

Alice was pretty sure this was what adults called “irony”, but from her view on the hospital bed, it didn’t look like irony. It just looked sad. “Happy birthday to me,” she whispered, “happy birthday to me, happy birthday dear Alice—”

“Happy birthday to you!”

Alice looked up. Tiffany was standing in the doorway, hands outstretched. One of them had a card in it, and both had gloves to match her face mask. “Aaand maaanyyy mooooooore,” she sang, before springing forward, her face instantly changing from excitement to worry. Well, as much of her face as Alice could see, anyway. “Sorry I couldn’t make it in time yesterday! Mother and Father stayed late at that conference and I couldn’t leave early or anything!”

“Tiffany!” Alice said, forcing herself to sit up a little higher in her bed. “Thanks for coming!”

“Aww, you’re welcome!” Tiffany leaned forward, arms wide again, but then stopped herself. “Am I allowed to give you a birthday hug? I know the doctors don’t want me too close in case I catch anything from you, or… you catch anything from me….”

Alice looked down at her lap. She’d heard the doctors talking to her mom, and then her mom trying to dumb it down like she was some little kid. She was nine! She could spell “chronic” and “immunodeficiency” just fine, and she was working on “mononucleosis”.

Her reverie was interrupted by Tiffany leaning in a little closer, and whispering, “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Alice smiled and hugged her best friend.

“And here’s your birthday card and birthday gift!” Tiffany said as soon as she’d pulled away. She dropped the card on Alice’s lap. “Open it, open it!”

When Alice opened it, she saw two things. The first was the written message: Happy birthday to the best witch ever! From, Tiffany Vandergard. Her signature was huge and loopy: it looked like she’d been practicing.

The second thing was a hundred-dollar bill.

“I couldn’t think of anything to get you,” Tiffany said as Alice lifted the bill, “and then I thought, you can get anything you want with money! So I asked Mother for some money for your present, and she gave me this! I bet you can get so many snacks from the vending machine!”

It seemed unfair. Even if Alice didn’t know how to say it, it seemed unfair that Tiffany got to be all happy and energetic, and Alice didn’t even know if she’d be able to walk to the vending machine and back. Or if the vending machine took hundred dollar bills.

She smiled. “Thanks, Tiffany. Hey, tell me about that conference you were at. There must have
been some pretty cool witches there, right?”

Tiffany pouted. Alice couldn’t see her mouth, but she could tell anyway: it was a whole-body pout. “It wasn’t interesting at all. Just a bunch of old ladies talking about how magic is dying and how to preserve it and so on. We weren’t even allowed to use brooms in the building! You don’t wanna hear about that. How was your birthday party?”

Alice closed her card and set it on her bedside table. “It was okay. The cake was nice. Mom was there, so were a bunch of the nurses and the doctors.”

“Any cool presents?” Alice didn’t have time to answer this before Tiffany gasped and pointed at the table. “Wait a second, where’s your wand? You have your wand, right?”

Alice just looked down and to the side, away from Tiffany.

Tiffany gasped again. “No way! Don’t they know how important your practice is? How are you gonna be the greatest witch ever if you don’t practice?”

“The nurses don’t really get magic. None of them are witches. But they said….” Alice sniffed. “They said I might not be strong enough for magic anymore.”

Tiffany didn’t have anything to say to that; her smile just sagged, kind of like the birthday balloons. Alice’s sobs started turning into coughs.

“Hey,” Tiffany finally said, her voice sounding a little panicked, “I know why you’re feeling so sad! It’s because these balloons are sad!” She pulled her wand out from a pocket, pointed it at one of the balloons, and cried, “Sufflo!”

The balloon inflated a little. Enough that it floated toward the ceiling again, its string taut once more. “There!” Tiffany said, staring at it, and then turning to face Alice. “Isn’t that… better?”

Alice couldn’t stop coughing. She hated this part, the part where her body just got tired out doing nothing. She sank further beneath her covers.

“I get it.” Tiffany was staring at the floor. “You can’t smile if you’re sick, can you. You can’t have fun like this. What’s so good about magic if it can’t actually help people?”

“Tiffany,” Alice tried to say, before another cough cut her off.

Tiffany looked up, eyes shining. Not with happiness, but something else… maybe determination. “That’s it! I’m gonna become the best witch ever, and I’m gonna figure out how to help you, and how to help everyone else too!” She stepped forward and clasped Alice’s hand, which still lay above the covers. “And then you’re gonna be all better, and you can be the best witch ever too, and we’ll smile together!”

Alice forced a smile, but only for about a second. “Thanks, Tiffany,” she said. “Can you go now? I need to rest.”

“Already? No, I get it.” But before Tiffany let go, she gripped tighter. “I promise.”

And then she was gone. Leaving Alice all alone in an empty, sterile room.

“You promise,” Alice dully repeated, curling up under her sheet. The words seemed to echo in the open space. “Good luck with that.”
Present Day

With one hand, Diana held the Financial Times; the other hand alternated between lifting her teacup and her cereal spoon to her lips.

She’d learned some time ago: it paid to multitask. Once upon a time she’d restricted it to reading an instructional book while walking through her house, or studying wandwork discreetly under the table at meals. These days, she had a few more responsibilities, and she had learned to step it up.

She wasn’t the only one, either.

“Whoa, coming through!” Akko called out with a muffled voice, careening across the breakfast hall. She dropped her heavy load of books onto the table across from Diana. A line of tea spilled over the edge of Diana’s cup. She raised an eyebrow. “Sorry,” Akko said, and then swallowed the half-muffin jammed in her mouth.

“You cannot possibly need that many textbooks,” Diana said, wiping up the tealine with a napkin before it reached the table.

“I do! But they’re not all for me.” Akko wiggled her eyebrows, but when Diana frowned, she sighed and explained, “I’m rereading the first-year textbooks too. As the officially unofficial mentor to the first year class, I’ve gotta be able to answer any questions they’ve got!”

“Are you sure this is what being a mentor entails?”

“I have no idea!” Akko flung herself face-first onto the table, shaking it again: Diana grabbed her teacup but failed to account for the cereal bowl. She wiped up the droplets of milk that had fallen onto the table. “I’m sorta making it up as I go,” Akko said, her voice once again muffled.

Diana was about to reply before she felt a finger tap her shoulder.

She looked around at a first-year-looking witch behind her: short black hair, and a pale face that was less beautiful, more sickly. Diana noticed a set of handlebars in front of her, then looked down and saw the girl was propped up on some form of mobility scooter. “Excuse me,” she said in a breathy tone, “are you Diana Cavendish?”

“Why, yes, I am,” Diana said. Smoothly, as if she hadn’t been interrupted in conversation with her girlfriend. “What’s your name?”

“Alice Gainesbury.” The girl lifted a big book and proffered it to Diana: it looked old but well-kept. “Could I get your autograph?”

Diana blinked, setting down her newspaper and cup. “I beg your pardon?”

“I’ve been getting the autographs of all the greatest and most important witches for my book!” Alice said as she opened the book, and flipped past several pages of signatures to get to a blank space. She pulled out a pen and offered it to Diana. “Could you sign it, please?”

Diana sighed, and smiled at herself. Really, she should have been expecting this. The whole world knew who she was by now, between being a rising star and appearing on every screen on the planet in the most dramatic magic act ever televised. How had she never been asked for an autograph before?

“By all means,” she said, and took the pen and book—but almost fumbled the book. “Pardon me!” she said. “It’s lighter than I expected.”
“It’s enchanted so I don’t get tired out carrying it!” Alice beamed as Diana signed a giant Diana Cavendish onto the page. “Thanks, Miss Cavendish! Have a great day!” She grabbed her handlebars and turned around to leave.

“Hang on,” Akko said, looking up from the table. “Don’t you want my autograph too?”

Alice and Diana both stared at her. Her face was red from being pressed against the table. “Who are you?” Alice said brightly.

“I’m Atsuko Kagari!” Akko pointed to herself with a thumb. “But you can call me—”

“I have no idea who that is. Bye!”

Alice turned the rest of the way around and pushed herself away with her right foot, while her left knee rested on a cushion. She moved slowly, as if she didn’t have much steam in her engine.

“I wasn’t even wearing the Groucho glasses,” Akko mumbled.

Diana looked around, and failed to stifle a surprised laugh. “Don’t tell me you actually did wear those the other day?”

“Everyone loved them! They were a hit!”

Diana rolled up her newspaper and gently batted Akko on the head. “Hey!” Akko protested.

“I can’t believe you sometimes,” Diana said, shaking her head and smiling. “You go so far out of your way… like with these textbooks. Aren’t you worried about… stretching yourself thin?”

“Look who’s talking,” Akko pulled out her wand and tapped Diana right back on the head. “How’s the Cavendish Manor’s finances doing?”

“Quite well. Our stocks are up four point three percent today on average, though some of our securities have—” Diana stopped at Akko’s sly smile. “Point taken. But the estate needs me to keep an eye on things.”

“And the first years need me,” Akko said, a determined frown overtaking her smile. “At least one of them will, I’m sure of it. And I’m gonna be there for her, like Shiny—like Professor Chariot was always there for me.”

Diana smiled, then put down the newspaper to reach her hand across the table. Akko took it automatically, and the two of them shared each other’s warmth.

Akko spoke up. “I’ve got, like, eight minutes before my next class—”

“Shh,” Diana whispered. “You can stay for a little while.” They locked eyes for a few seconds, smiling at each other.

The seconds stretched out into minutes. Diana looked around, then said, “So, how are Lotte and Sucy doing—”

Akko raised a finger to her lips. “I thought this was us time.”

“Right.”

Then a red blur whizzed over the table, smacking them both in in the side of the head. “Ow!” Akko yelled, rubbing her head and looking after the blur. “Is that the Shooting Star?”
“Young lady!” Professor Finnelan declared, standing over Tiff as she tried to hide inside her hat. “You will keep that broom under control or face the consequences!”

“You know it’s, like, the legendary broom or whatever, right?” Char said, sitting at the same breakfast table as Tiff and Mani. “It kinda does what it wants.”

Professor Finnelan glared at her, the kind of glare that cut through steel. However, Char was made of either far stronger or far squishier stuff. The glare bounced off. “What?” she said with a shrug.

Char was correct, which was precisely the problem. Breakfast time wasn’t even over, and the legendary broom in question had smacked a dozen girls upside the head with its feathers, willfully upended trays of bagels and muffins, and spilled some milk in front of a crowd of crying first-years. Tiff understood that it enjoyed being free, but why did it have to be free in here?

At present the Shooting Star was hovering tauntingly overhead, well out of arm’s reach. Tiff looked up and grimaced at it.

Professor Finnelan pointed an accusing finger her way. “I don’t care whether it’s legendary, or whether you found it in an old closet! You’ll make every effort to stop this mayhem if you don’t want to receive detention on your second day of classes, and to get it replaced with the worst school issued broom we have!”

That got Tiff to bolt to her feet. “Oh, um, yes, ma’am!” She stood on her chair and reached for the Star. “Come on, Star,” she said, and then made kissing noises with her mouth. And then regretted it. What was this, a kitten?

Yet it seemed to be working. The Star hovered a little lower, albeit still out of reach.

“Come on, Star,” Tiff repeated, beckoning it down, saying the first things that came into her head. “Come on, let’s just be together for a while, okay? I’ll, uh, wax your handle!”

“That’s what she said!”

“Shut up, Char,” Tiff hissed, before smiling back up at her broom. Well, the broom. Not even slightly her broom. “Please? If you don’t get down here, I’ll be using one of the school brooms! Just come on down, and I’ll—”

“Get down here this instant,” Professor Finnelan exclaimed, whipping out her wand and pointing it skyward, “before I blow you to bits!”

“No, don’t—”

And it had been going so well. The Shooting Star, which had been inching steadily closer, took off as quickly as its name implied through an open window. Professor Finnelan grumbled and turned around to leave.

“I have a legendary cat,” Tiffany grumbled, sitting back down in her chair. “Did you know it tried to follow me into the bathroom this morning? Why does my broom have to be so strange?”

“I don’t know,” Mani said, stirring her cereal with her spoon. “I think it’s kind of nice. Having something that cares that much about you.”

“Yup. Everyone loves being peeped on by a broom, right?” Char rolled her eyes. “I’m with Tiff. It’s weird.”
“Excuse me?” said a familiar voice. “Are you Anne Finnelan?”

“Professor Finnelan,” came the immediate reply. “Can I help you, young lady?”

“Your work in transfiguration magic is incredible! I was wondering, could I have your autograph?”

Tiff twisted around in her seat, just in time to see Professor Finnelan blush, and accept a pen from an outstretched hand. “Oh! Well, anything for a fan, I suppose,” she said.

“Alice?” Tiff said, quietly.

Alice looked over, and her eyes widened—but she didn’t let go of the book as Professor Finnelan was signing it. “Tiffany?” she said.

“Alice!” Tiff stood up from her chair and ran over to Alice, then slowed down to grab her in a hug—gently so as not to hurt her. “Where were you?” she said.

“Keep signing it,” Alice said, as Professor Finnelan hesitated. “It’s nice to see you again too, Tiffany,” she continued in a somewhat rote tone. “Aaaaand… thank you!”

Professor Finnelan finished signing and returned the pen. Alice took it, and returned the book to a cubby on her scooter, then hugged Tiffany back, albeit without the same enthusiasm. That was fine: Tiffany knew her friend.

“Oh my goodness, where were you?” Tiffany repeated. “I waited by the Tor for an hour! And then it turned out you’d already gotten to school, but I didn’t see you at the entrance ceremony, and I didn’t see you yesterday either, and—I was worried!”

“You were?” Mani said, behind her. “You should have told us!”

Tiff whirled her head around to glare at Mani, then looked back to Alice. But Alice was frowning. “What do you think happened?” she said. “The same thing that always happens.”

Tiff pulled her hand to her mouth. “You were sick again?”

Alice grunted. “It started two mornings ago, and Mom wanted me to get to Luna Nova before I got worse. It only lasted through yesterday, though. I like it when it does that.” She smiled for a moment, then scowled. “You knew this could happen!”

“Sorry! I should have arrived earlier, but you haven’t been sick for a while, I was hoping—” Tiffany sighed. “I thought you’d just left without me.”

“Are you kidding?” Alice laughed. “I wouldn’t just leave you behind.”

“Sorry,” Tiffany said. “It’s really good to see you.”

“So, you’re the Alice that Tiff mentioned,” said Char, leaning on a table.

Alice turned her attention from Tiffany to Char, and smiled blankly. “Tiff?”

“Oh yeah, it’s short for Tiffany. It’s what I call her cuz we’re besties.” Char leaned forward and draped her arm over Tiff, and pulled Mani close with her other arm. “Me and Mani and Tiff here. Kinda had a life changing bonding kinda experience the other day. You shoulda been there.” She winked.

Alice didn’t exactly wink back. “Shut up, Char,” Tiffany hissed, and then turned back around to
face her friend. “Alice,” Tiffany began, “I really—”

“I wouldn’t just leave you behind,” Alice repeated, stiffly. Without another word, she swung her mobility scooter around and sped away.

“Alice!” Tiffany shook off Char’s arm and ran forward after her, and quickly caught up. There was a step up at the edge of the dining hall. Alice was stopped there, glaring at it like it was her worst enemy.

“They really didn’t think about accessibility here, did they?” Tiffany said, trying to sound jokey and uncertain if she was succeeding. “Mani had a similar problem yesterday, actually… here, let me—”

“I’m fine!” Alice hissed. She took a deep breath, then heaved her scooter up and over the step, and then took another few breaths after that, leaning heavily on her handlebars. “I don’t… want to talk to you right now.”

Tiffany backed away, staring, as Alice collected her breath and wheeled away.

“Aww, that sucks,” Char said. “She gets that dope scooter, and I don’t get to use my brooms? This is discrimination.”

“It’s really not,” Mani mumbled, “not if she’s chronically ill—”

“And I’m chronically lazy, it’s totally a thing!” Char seemed ready to keep going, but then Tiff fixed with a glare, and she petered out. “Oh, yeah, and I totally just made her feel bad and screwed with your friendship, didn’t I. Sorry.”

Tiffany growled. So what if Alice didn’t want to talk to her? She needed to make this right!

And then Mani looked at her watch, and gasped. “Oh my goodness, we’re gonna be late for class!” She shoved the watch under Tiff’s face, and Tiffany saw that she had… she pulled out her schedule… three minutes before her first class of Magic Astronomy with Professor Chariot. Three minutes in a building she barely knew how to navigate..

Alice would still be around at lunchtime, right?

“Let’s go!” she said.

“Ugh,” Char said, slouching along as Mani and Tiff started running. “Too fast.”

Tiffany skidded to a halt, sighed, and pulled out her wand. “Paleis Capama.” Char rose from the floor, surrounded by a green glow. “Now come on,” she said, resuming her run and dragging Char behind her like a half-deflated balloon.

Alice would definitely still be around at lunchtime, right? Definitely.

Alice had learned long ago how to avoid falling asleep from tiredness, at least for a while.

This potions class was testing that ability. She sagged forward in her seat as the elderly Professor Lukić, her hair so gray with age as to appear blue, droned on about how marvelous and mystical and terrifying potions were. It was like falling asleep at the beach, with the white noise of the waves to carry her to dreamland….

Something prodded her arm. Something very small and pointy.
Alice jerked awake and looked sharply to her right. “Yo, dude,” said the girl to her right, her hair shaggy and unkempt. Her glasses were huge, grossly magnifying her eyes. “Are you doing all right? Your energy’s really messed up.”

“My… I’m fine, thank you.” Alice shook herself and returned to trying to focus on the teaching. She wasn’t going to let herself get distracted again. She wasn’t—

“Oh, but, like, I think you’re my roommate?”

The girl jabbed her again, and when Alice looked down to see what was doing the jabbing, she recoiled with a yelp. That was a needle! A needle with a sort of copper handle on it! To be fair, the girl was holding it by the pointy end and jabbing her with the blunt end, but still! “What are you doing!” she hissed, yanking her arm toward herself.

“Your chi’s super blocked, dude. It’s probably why you couldn’t make it to the room all yesterday, right? Oh yeah, my name’s Rain, and you’re probably Alice, right?”

“What I am is trying to work.” Alice focused on the professor’s words, and tried to take note of what she was saying.

“… this class of potions, for instance, has a rather curious effect. They can transport a witch with near-instantaneity! From standing upright, to a supine position, six feet under.” The professor cackled.

Frightening? Arguably. But completely irrelevant. Alice groaned, and Professor Lukić seemed too wrapped up in her own witchiness to notice. “Who am I kidding,” she mumbled to herself, and then suppressed a cough. “I should just skip the class and go back to bed.”

“Hell yeah, dude.” Rain raised her fist to Alice, and Alice wasn’t sure why: the girl didn’t seem ready to punch her. “Fight the system.”

“Don’t fight the system!” hissed the witch past Rain, in a Latin-accented voice. “The system is trying to help you!” She was taking feverish notes, fast enough that she was probably transcribing what Professor Lukić was saying word-for-word, and obvious muscles rippled beneath her robe with each movement.

“Oh yeah,” Rain said as Alice stared, “that’s our other roommate, Ximena. She made me go to bed at ten, and tried to get me up at six to go jogging. She’s lame.”

“I believe in a good night’s sleep, a daily regimen, and a proper education. If that makes me lame, then so be it.” Ximena flipped to the next page of her notebook with a flourish.

Alice sighed and returned to her own, paltry notes. She’d thought, or at least hoped, she’d be rooming with Tiffany. Then her first and second nights’ roommates had been a bunch of empty hospital beds, just in case she was still contagious—and now her roommates would be these two.

And Tiffany had already found someone else. Two someones. She’d been away from her for two days, and already she’d—

Alice’s hand balled into a fist for as long as she could keep it that way.

Lunch tasted good, at least. Alice munched on some salad with the honey mustard dressing she liked, and she’d stashed several rolls into one of the cubbies on her mobility scooter for later. That was one nice thing about needing a scooter: extra storage space.
“Dude, you shouldn’t use so much salad sauce,” Rain said, reaching behind Alice’s back for some reason. She’d been doing it for minutes. “It overpowers the natural flavor.”

“I have to agree with Rain,” Ximena said, munching mechanically on her undressed salad. “It’s less healthy than eating the greens on their own.”

“I know what I like,” Alice muttered, staring at her salad. Rain’s hand moved in her peripheral vision again, and she ignored it. “And honey mustard is what I like.”

“But, dude, like—”

“I’m not a dude!” Alice burst out, and rounded on Ximena in turn. “And what is this, the ‘share unwanted opinions on salad’ table? Let me eat in peace! And stop reaching behind my back!” she said, as Rain did it again.

“Whatever, I’m done,” Rain said, then got back to chowing down her unflavored vegetables like they were the most delicious things in the world.

Alice sighed and got back to her honey-mustard-with-salad.

“Alice!”

She looked up to see Tiffany approaching from the other side of the table. “Alice,” Tiffany said, “I am so, so sorry about earlier.” She rounded around the table as she continued, “I didn’t have time earlier, because of classes, but now that it’s lunch, I just wanted to apologize properly for—your back’s covered in needles.”

Alice blinked. “What.” Then she twisted her neck around and gasped. Her back was covered in needles. About a dozen of them, piercing her uniform and sticking into her skin in a strange geometric pattern. “What?”

Rain beamed. “The treatment’s working, dude! You look way better! Though I guess I placed a couple to instill anger by mistake….”

“Get these out of me.” Alice tried to reach behind her back, but she didn’t have the flexibility to reach a single needle. “Get these out now!”

“Ohhhh, nevermind, I did it right. You’re just pissed.” Rain stood up fast and started backing away. “I’ll talk to you later. Bye!” And she turned tail and started running.

“Alice,” Tiffany said, stepping forward, “I can pull those out for you—”

With a shriek of frustration, Alice spun her scooter around and kicked herself forward.

In a way, she had the advantage: wheels. But that didn’t really count when it was stacked up against her disadvantages of frailty, sickness, and so on. Despite all that, though, she was keeping pace with Rain, who seemed to be running as hard as she could.

“Don’t clench your teeth!”

Alice looked to her left to see Ximena jogging easily beside her, keeping pace without effort. “If you clench your teeth when you’re doing exercise, you get jaw cramps. They’re not fun.”

Alice glared at her and kicked forward faster.

But then she rounded a corner and came upon her greatest enemy.
“Oh, man,” Rain said, grimacing awkwardly from atop a flight of stairs. “I don’t wanna make you feel, like, differently abled or anything by being up here… but on the other hand, I feel like you’re gonna kick my teeth in if I come down.”

With another shout of anger, Alice shoved her scooter aside and ran up the flight of stairs. She took two steps at a time, and before she knew it, she was at the top. Rain turned to run again, but Alice grabbed her by the collar and yanked her close, her other fist raised. “You… you pull these out of me…” she panted. “Right… right….”

Something occurred to her—something that probably should have occurred about a minute before. She was tired, sure. She was panting, sure. But she wasn’t collapsed.

She glanced down at the flight of stairs beneath her: two dozen steps that she’d just taken two at a time. Her mobility scooter lay on its side at the bottom.

Her hand slipped off Rain’s collar, and her other fist unclenched, just in time for both her hands to lean into her knees as she bent over with exertion. “What,” she panted, “what did you do to me?”

“It’s acupuncture, dude.” Rain pulled out another needle from her robe, just like the ones making a constellation on Alice’s back, and fiddled with it. “Ancient Chinese art that can totally unlock your crazy hidden energy. I told you it was working.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Ximena as she crested the steps, holding the scooter in both hands. “You don’t unlock energy, you grow it. Hey!” She set the scooter down, then took both of Alice’s shoulders with her hands, pulling her upright. “What if you came on my early morning jogs? I could use a running partner, and we could start slow if you need it!”

“That’s the one at, like, six, right?” Rain yawned. “You’re a crazy person.”

“It’s the best part of the day!” Ximena grinned, revealing two rows of pearly whites. “Come on, deep breaths. In through your nose, out through your mouth. It’s better for you!”

Alice just stared down at her legs. She could run. Not forever—maybe not even as long as a normal person—but she could run.

“Yo, dude? Alice? Are you—are you crying?”

The poster on the wall read: ‘Witches Wanted—Poison Experiments—£10 per Test—Contact Sucy Manbavaran’. It had a bunch of strips of paper at the bottom with a phone number, which tore off easily. The poster itself, however, refused to come off.

“Sucy!” Akko yelled, yanking at it. “You can’t put up posters for potion experiments!”

“Why not?” Sucy hovered at Akko’s side like a wraith, with a satchel full of posters slung over her back. Her face was flat as usual, but it didn’t stop Akko from being able to see she was enjoying this. “You’re putting up posters, aren’t you?”

“It’s different!” Akko had an identical satchel. “My posters are for the relay race! Yours could really get someone hurt!”

“Well, I can’t test anything on you anymore—you’re immune to everything I’ve got.” Sucy shrugged. “They’re being compensated.”

“That is so not the point!” Akko kept yanking at the loose corner at the top and finally ripped off
just the corner, leaving the rest of the poster intact. “The first years don’t know better! What if they sign up as test subjects?”

“Victims. The word you’re thinking of is victims.”

“Not better!” Akko growled. “How did you even glue this on?”

Sucy reached into her pocket and pulled out a corked glass vessel, in which swirled a viscous green liquid. “I call it the Diakko Adhesive.”

“Diakko? That sounds like my name… and… Diana’s name?”

“Lotte says it’s your ship name. Like relationship,” Sucy added, as Akko squinted. “It’s a good name for glue, because you’re inseparable.”

“We are not inseparable!” Akko yelled.

“Hello, Akko!”

Before Akko could react, Diana was in her peripheral vision, and took Akko's hand in hers. “How was your second day back?” Diana asked.

“Okay,” Akko said, pouting and blushing a bit, “maybe we’re a little inseparable. And it was great, thanks,” she added, smiling back at Diana.

They looked into each others’ eyes for a few seconds, and Akko lost her train of thought.

“But don’t change the subject!” she said suddenly, spinning back to look at Sucy, who had her tongue out in disgust. “You have to take this down so I can put up my posters!”

“Akko,” Diana said, “just put them up… over hers.”

Akko blinked. “Diana, you’re a genius!” She yanked out a poster in her left hand and a wand in her right, enchanted Sucy’s poster with a wave of her wand, then slapped her poster onto it. Sucy’s poster, bewitched to be super-sticky, held the Relay Race poster perfectly. “There!” Akko said, hands triumphantly on her hips. “Now the first years will know about the race instead of how to poison themselves for money!”

“Sure.” Sucy walked to the left, past her and Diana, and pulled out another poster from her satchel. “Onto the next one, then.” She splashed some of the Diakko Adhesive on the wall, slapped the poster on, and kept walking.

“Wait, whaddya mean ‘next’?” Akko looked the other way from where Sucy was walking, and saw a line of posters at regular intervals, all down the hallway.

Akko ran down the hallway, took a hard left, and came across yet more posters. What was worse, as she kept running, she abruptly came upon a row of posters that all had their phone numbers ripped off. “Who took these?” Akko wailed.

“I am gonna make so much money, dude,” Rain said, pulling off yet another row of phone numbers as they walked past some brunette girl who was yanking at her hair. Rain stuffed them into a pocket that was already bulging with paper shreds.

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” Alice said, trundling along beside her on her mobility scooter. “You don’t get ten pounds per paper, you get ten pounds for showing up. They’re not coupons.”
The needles had been removed from her back, and much of the initial effect had worn off, but she still felt unusually energetic. She didn’t even need to tell her friends to slow down for her.

“No, dude, you don’t get it.” Rain tapped her forehead. “If no other witches show up because they don’t know the phone number to call, then who’s gonna have to do all the tests? Who’s gonna make bank?” Rain swiped another row of numbers, then did a thumbs up with the same hand. “This girl.”

“That sounds like a terrible idea,” Ximena said, shivering with disgust on Alice’s other side. “Shoving a bunch of untested chemicals into your body? You couldn’t pay me to do that.”

“Well, you sure could pay me.” Rain tore off some more numbers. “We get it, Ximena, you’re a health nut.”

“And we get it, Rain!” Ximena shot back. “You’re a hippie!”

The two glowered at each other.

“And I’m the adorable helpless waif to round us out,” Alice cut in, pushing her scooter along a little faster to get between the two. “We’re just a bunch of walking, talking stereotypes, aren’t we? We should walk into a bar sometime.”

Rain kept glaring at Ximena, and Ximena kept glaring at Rain. And then Ximena snorted, and broke eye contact as she covered her face. A smile grew its way onto Rain’s face, slowly but surely. “You know what?” she said, throwing an arm around Alice and Ximena. “You dudes are all right.”

Alice laughed, and they kept going around the corner. Her ears picked up at the sound of an approaching conversation.

“Char, you don’t get more money by taking more phone numbers. It’s all the same test.”

“The thing is, Tiff,” said the slouching witch coming up the hallway, with two others in tow, “what happens if no one else shows up, because I took all the phone numbers? I get all the cash, that’s what. Easy money.”

“You have to drink experimental potions to get the money!” said a third witch, darker in complexion and yet somehow still visibly blanching. “That could be really dangerous!” As she walked, she poked her wand into a small handheld sphere and jiggled it around a bit. A second later, Alice heard a muffled explosion.

“Meh,” said the sloucher, and tore off another row of papers.

Tiffany, at the center of the group, looked forward from her friends, and stuttered mid-step. “Alice!” she said, and rushed forward, but then stopped halfway to her, looking up in surprise at Rain and Ximena on either side of her. “Oh, okay. You… you must be Alice’s roommates! It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She shoved her hand forward to shake.

Rain high-fived it. “Right on, dude. My name’s, like, Rain.”

As Tiffany looked uncertainly at her hand, the slouching witch moved forward, still leaning against the wall. Alice remembered now: Tiffany had called her ‘Char’. “Wait, let me guess,” Char said, and furrowed her brow with concentration. “Drizzle?”

“What?” Rain squinted. “No, dude, my name’s not like rain. My name’s, like, Rain.”

“Dude!”

But Char had noticed something else, and she slowly looked down to see Rain’s bulging pocket of torn papers. Just as Rain looked down to see Char’s similarly full pocket.

They locked gazes and glared at each other.

“Anyway,” Ximena said, stepping forward decisively and grabbing Tiffany’s still-outstretched hand in a grip that was obviously painful in its tightness. “I’m Ximena Lopez. What’s your name?”

“Ouch—I’m Tiffany Vandergard, of course!” Tiffany pulled her hand out and beamed, but the beam flickered and died as she looked at Ximena’s face, still politely smiling. “You know, Tiffany? Alice’s best friend? Since childhood?”

Ximena’s smile, too, faded. Tiffany’s jaw sagged. “Has she seriously not—did you seriously not mention me?” she said, turning to Alice.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Alice said. “It must have slipped my mind with all the new friendmaking I was doing.” She grimaced.

Tiffany winced, like the grimace had been a poke to the face. “Alice, I’m sorry, I already said, but….”

“But nothing! You went and found a bunch of new friends? Well, guess what!” Alice wrapped her arms around Rain and Ximena. “I can find friends too! Ha!”

They stared each other down. Well, Alice stared Tiffany down. Tiffany just stared down, looking at her shoes.

“Uh… hey! Check this out!” exclaimed the third witch with Tiffany. Mani, if Alice remembered correctly. She tapped a poster on the wall which was, surprisingly, not related to potion testing. “The Luna Nova Cup Broom Relay! That could be fun to watch together, and you two could catch up!”

“To watch?” Tiffany snorted. “They have a broom race here?” She leaned in close and read bits and pieces of the poster out loud. “Teams of three, determined by room… sign-up by this Friday… winner gets the prestigious Luna Nova Cup! We are absolutely signing up for that! We’ll be a shoe-in!”

She turned back to Alice, forcing on another smile. “Do you think you’re up to signing up as well?”

*Do you think you’re up to signing up.* Alice glowered, and clenched her fists. “I am,” she said. “And you know what? We’re not just going to race. We’re going to win! I’m going to beat you!”

At this, Tiffany’s smile froze. Rain glanced at Alice, then leaned forward and took Char by the shoulder, and whispered something Alice couldn’t hear. Char nodded.

“Well,” Tiffany finally said, “you’ve never beaten me in a broom race before, so I’m not really sure how you’re going to do that, but… good luck!” She waved. “We’ve got to get to our last class. See you later!”

“Goodbye!” Alice forced a wave of her own, and Tiffany turned around and departed with her
friends. Her new best friends. “You’ve never beaten me before! Good luck!” Alice said in a mocking, sing-song tone under her breath. “You condescending—”

“Yo, dude?” Rain said, frowning at her. “What you said about how you can make friends too… are we, like, only your friends so you can score points?”

Alice’s eyes widened. “Oh, no, I didn’t mean to—I wasn’t trying to imply—” She took a breath, and then another few, feeling her heart speed up. Or maybe it had been fast for a while. That wasn’t good. “I’m sorry;” she said, leaning heavily on her handlebars. “I guess it did sound that way, and… I didn’t mean to. It’s just, Tiffany… she’s really pissing me off right now!”

She took another breath, and felt her heart rate start to calm down. “Are you mad at me?” she said to Rain, and then turned around to look at Ximena, who seemed similarly concerned. “I’m sorry if you’re mad at me. I really don’t want that. Please still be friends,” she whispered.

Ximena smiled. “It’s okay. Everyone makes mistakes.”

Alice heaved a breath of relief. She scooted a little in front of them, then swung her scooter around so she could look at the two of them at once. “So are you okay with doing the race?”

“Oh, we’re totally doing the race.” Rain leaned in. “I just made a bet with that Char dude. Whoever does better in the race gets all the phone numbers from the posters, and the loser doesn’t get to go and get any potion-testing money. So count me in.”

She raised her fist again, and Alice still didn’t know why. Rain frowned. “Fistbump, dude. It’s called a fistbump. Bump your fist.”

Rain nodded without hesitation, but Alice couldn’t be so casual. She was good, or rather had been, once. These days, with her illness, she didn’t really have the strength….

No. These days, she had some of that strength back. Or could get it back. She nodded.

“Great!” Ximena’s grin got wider. “Next question. Can you teach me how to fly a broom?”

“Mani,” Tiff said, “why are you hyperventilating?”

They were around the corner from Alice’s group, and Mani was sagging against a wall and turning blue. “Broom race?” she managed. “Are we really signing up for a broom race? I can’t do that!”

“Mate, chill,” Char said, leaning in and resting a comforting hand on Mani’s shoulder. “You wanna learn to fly better, right? I can’t think of a better chance.”

“But—but—there’s no way I can learn in time, and… there’s no way we’re gonna win.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” Tiffany held a hand to her chest. “Not to sound too arrogant, but I’m the witch with the Shooting Star. The fastest, most durable, and all around greatest broom of all
Char squinted. “Tiff, you know what a relay is, right?”

“It’s an exaggeration.” Tiff growled. “Fine. Let’s get some practicing in.”

Alice would come around.
It was rough going over the grass with a mobility scooter. Alice was surprised to find she was equal to it.

“I can’t believe you’ve never flown a broom before,” she said, walking out to the field at sunrise. A host of needles were stuck in her back—more of them than the previous day, since Rain had had more time to insert them this morning. Alice had woken up at the break of dawn before, but never with this much energy. She could do a jig!

Okay, maybe not a jig. But something.

“Well, you see…” Ximena frowned. “I’m forgetting the words. What’s the term for the fear of clinging to a thin stick of wood, hurtling above the ground at a hundred miles per hour, hundreds of feet in the air?”

“Acrophobia?” Rain said, yawning through the word so that it was barely decipherable.

“No, that’s not it…. Oh, I remember!” Ximena snapped her fingers. “Common sense.”

Alice groaned. “You’re not going to be hundreds of feet in the air. But if it helps….” As they approached the broom track, she pulled out her wand and pointed it at Ximena. "Oruihon Deance!"

A puff of smoke burst into being around Ximena, and when it cleared she was decked out in kneepads, elbowpads, and a helmet. “Oh!” she said, looking down at herself. “That does help, actually.”

“I thought so. It’s a useful spell: I learned it for myself when I was learning to fly with….” Alice grimaced. “Well, the point is, you’re safer now.”

They reached the track, and Alice took her broom from its holster on the side of her scooter. “Let’s start!” she said.

Ximena was a quick study. Her flight was stiff and she obviously wasn’t fully over her fear, judging by how she kept glancing down and swerving, but it wasn’t fifteen minutes before she understood the basics. She only tumbled a few times, too. “You don’t need to muscle it so much,” Rain called out, as Ximena zoomed past her. “Be the broom, dude!”

Well, Ximena wasn’t the broom, but she wasn’t half-bad, Alice thought.

Rain was up next, and Rain was definitely the broom. She swept around the track with ease so practiced it hardly looked practiced at all. Alice looked at her and laughed: this was some of the best broomwork she’d ever seen!

Second best. Her fist clenched again. “We’re going to win,” she whispered. “I’m going to win.”

“What was that?” Ximena asked, leaning in.

“Nothing!”

Ximena shrugged, and Rain swept back in for an easy landing next to them. “Simplifico,” she said, grinning. “I’ve been flying with my family since I was walking.”

“Well, Alice, you’re up!” Ximena almost patted her on the back, but seemed to notice the still-
present needles. She settled for a friendly wave. “Good luck!”

“Good luck,” Alice repeated to herself. She stepped forward and held her broom in front of her. *First, you hold the broom.*

The words came back to her. *Then, you pay respect to the broom.* She nodded, trying not to think about whose words these were.

*Then, get on. Picture yourself in the air, and cast the spell!*

“*Tia freyre!***” she shouted, and rose. She was flying again—really flying!

She gasped, and willed herself to go forward. Slowly at first, but then faster and faster… and then slower again, for the turn. Before long she’d completed a lap of the circuit! She grinned, and impelled herself faster….

But her hand was slipping. All of a sudden she noticed it: the ache in her muscles, of keeping the correct posture over her broom. She grabbed at the handle as hard as she could, but the motion unbalanced her, and she spun for a moment before being flung.

She hit the ground hard on her front.

“Whoa, dude!” She glanced up behind her to see Rain flying her way; she coming to a halt next to Alice. “You okay? That was a messed-up fall.”

Alice forced herself to take deep breaths, even as she tasted blood in her mouth: she must have bitten her tongue. Then she felt wetness on her lips, and dragged her hand up to wipe beneath her nose, and saw blood there too.

She grinned. “I haven’t… flown that far… in *years.*” Alice pushed herself to a kneeling position, and looked up at Rain. “I’m gonna go again!”

“Oh, no you’re not.” This was Ximena: as Alice glanced to her right, she saw her approaching on foot, carrying Alice’s stroller. She set it down, then stuck out her hand for Alice to take. “I’m gonna make sure you didn’t break anything, and then I’m going to get you to the nurse so she can make double sure.”

Alice felt her brow contract. “But—”

“And *then,*” Ximena continued, “we’re going to come out here again tomorrow. And you’re going to work on exercises to train up your muscles. So you can stay on without falling off. Understand?”

Alice looked up a little longer, then nodded, and reached out to take Ximena’s hand.

Altogether, it had been a pretty great practice.

Mani took a deep breath, then—visibly shaking—she mounted her broom and said, “*Tia Freyre.*”

Her broom hovered off the ground, and she smiled even as she shook. “All right,” she called out, “I’m going to try taking it slow—”

Her broom burst forward, and Mani crashed into the mattresses again, all the way on the other side of the field. The mattresses went flying like bowling pins in a strike. Thank goodness they’d brought so many.
“You know,” Char said to Tiff, as the two of them watched from the sidelines, “she would be an absolute ripper if her section were a straightaway.”

“And if she didn’t need to pass the baton.”

“True.” Char yawned and sat down, then lay down in the grass. “You should probably go get her.”

“I got her the last five times.”

“Okay, and?”

Tiff sighed and trudged toward Mani. She’d sprinted the first time Mani had crashed, but on take six it was difficult to get excited. “Mani, are you conscious?” she said once she’d reached the pile of mattresses she’d set up to stop Mani. Said pile was now strewn far and wide from the impact, with Mani prone upon three of them. “Are you okay?”

“Mmmnnnh,” Mani said.

“That doesn’t help me, Mani.”

“I don’t wanna do this,” Mani mumbled.

“You have to!” Tiffany stuck out her hand for Mani to take, and Mani managed to grab it after a few tries. She let herself get pulled off the mattresses and to her feet, and then started walking under her own power. Tiffany pulled out her wand and, for the seventh time that day, set up the mattresses with wandwork.

“You’re very good at flying, yes? Do you have any tips on how I can stop doing that?” Mani asked.

“None, sorry. You just seem to have too much magic.” Tiffany was reminded of a time when she’d been using the family computer, and had accidentally set the mouse sensitivity up far too high. One tiny movement, and the cursor went flying across the screen. She’d thought it was broken, but it had been a simple matter of changing the setting back. If only Mani had such a setting, she thought. “Maybe pour some more into the thing Professor Chariot gave you?”

“It doesn’t work, unless I exhaust myself so much I can’t fly at all. Can I at least not go again for a while, and watch one of you practice? I don’t want to be any trouble,” Mani said, frowning, “but neither of you have gone once yet. And I am not learning anything.”

“I still don’t have a broom,” Tiffany said. Since Professor Finnelan’s threat the previous day, the Shooting Star had been nowhere to be seen, and her old broom still needed repairs. “And good luck trying to get Char to practice.”

“Doesn’t the school have brooms?”

Tiffany winced. Her old broom had been perfection itself, and the Shooting Star, well, that was beyond perfection. The idea of using the school-issued broom… it would be like having a choice between caviar and filet mignon, and going to McDonald’s instead.

“You don’t want to do that?” Mani asked. When Tiffany shook her head, Mani sighed. “All right, then.”

She marched forward and stood over Char. “Char! Please get up and practice!”

“Meh.”
“Come on!” Mani stomped her foot. “We all need to practice or it’s not fair!”

“Ugh, fine. Help me up?” Char stuck out a hand, the other one holding her broom. Mani frowned, but pulled her up anyway. “All right, here I go.”

Char… wasn’t terrible. But that was damning with faint praise. She wobbled in the turns, she didn’t take the opportunity to gain speed in the straights, and her form was overall amateur. “Nailed it,” she said after completing three laps of the track. As her broom came to a stop, she oozed off it.

“Mm… no.” Tiff shook her head. “If ‘nailed it’ means what I think it means, then no, you did not.”

“Gimme a break.” Char was already lying on the grass. “Flying’s harder with one broom than two. Way less stable.”

Tiff bit her tongue, because she was certain the alternative would be hurling a minute-long tirade about what an abuse to the whole discipline of flight it was to use two brooms to string a hammock. So she bit her tongue instead.

Finally, she managed to say, very kindly, “Wouldn’t you like to practice so you can improve?”

“Meh.” Char waved up at her. “You said you could win this all by yourself, right?”

“Well, yes, I’m certain I could—”

“Then it’s fine.” Char’s hand flopped back to the ground. “I just gotta fly my bit, keep a decent pace, and let you do all the good flying. We’re good already.”

“I—but you—just because I said that, it doesn’t…..” Tiffany groaned. The logic was irrefutable: after all, it was hers. “Fine. Mani, it’s your turn again.”

“Oh, no! I’m going to get a concussion if this keeps up!” Mani pointed at Tiff. “You should find your broom, or just take one from the school! It’ll be as good as everyone else’s!”

“I can’t just find it—it’s the Shooting Star. It’ll come to me when it’s ready.” Tiffany glanced at the ground and mumbled, “I still don’t know why it came to me the first time… and,” she added, looking back up, “I refuse to use one of those shoddy school-issued brooms.”

“Welp.” Char had her hands behind her head, and her hat over her face. “Looks like each of us has a great reason not to practice.”

“I have a good reason,” Mani said, huffing and crossing her arms. “The two of you are just being… dumb!”

Tiff turned the other way. “I was going to say something similar!”

“Okay, so each of us has a great reason not to practice and the other two are being dumb. Got it.” Char yawned, and added, “Don’t wait for me.” Six seconds later, the snoring started.

Tiff sighed and wandered away, toward the school. After a few seconds she sighed, and put her hands around her mouth like a megaphone. “Shooting Star?” she called out, as if shouting for a lost pet. “Where are you, Shooting Star?”

What the heck, right? She had nothing to lose but her steadily-eroding dignity.

Akko sat in the stands, pouting as she watched the first-years’ first day of broom class. To her side
was a stack of textbooks, and one was on her lap: she glanced down at it periodically.

“What’s the glum look for?” said Lotte’s voice right next to her. Akko glanced up and saw her friend edging closer on the stands.

“Hi, Lotte.” Akko sighed. “Professor Nelson doesn’t want my help with training the first-years. Apparently she’s ‘legally liable if I get someone’s spine broken,’” she said, adding the air-quotes with her fingers. “It’s a lot of kids to keep track of! She could use the help!”

She waited a second, then added, “Also, she got mad when I asked whether Nelson was her first or last name.”

“Isn’t Nelson a boy’s name when it comes first?” Lotte asked.

“That’s what I was thinking… but we all say ‘Professor Chariot’ and ‘Professor Croix’, right? Not ‘Professor du Nord’ or ‘Professor Meridies’?” Akko shrugged. “Anyway, she forbade me from coming near any of her classes ever again, unless I was in them. So I kept walking until she stopped glaring at me.” She looked down at the field, where Professor Nelson was instructing a short-haired witch who seemed barely able to hold her broom. That had to be Alice, if she remembered correctly from the other day.

“Okay.” Lotte scooched a little closer, but not by much: the pile of textbooks was still between her and Akko. “What are you doing the rest of the day?”

“Oh!” Akko beamed, squinting at the field. There was Tiffany, flying laps on a school-issued broom with the most defeated expression imaginable on her face. “What I’m doing… well, there’s classes after my break is over, and then I’ve got schoolwork, then I’ve got to help one of the first-years with Numerology homework—I think her name is Rain, which doesn’t sound like a real name but whatever—and then… dinner with Diana and bed, I guess.”

“Oh.” Lotte chanced a smile. “So you’ll be coming back to the room?”

“Well, I’ll probably just spend the night with Diana again….” Akko glanced over the textbooks, saw Lotte’s radiant blush, and realized what she’d just said. “Not like that! We just cuddle! I’m not nearly ready for that yet!”

Lotte’s cheeks were puffed up with trapped air, and her eyes were screwed up tight behind her half-framed glasses. Akko looked up at the sky, tapping at the air with her finger as she recalled tomorrow’s activities. “Tomorrow it’s wake up, breakfast with Diana, class, see if the first-years need flight help while Professor Nelson’s not looking—”

“Sucy and I don’t like that you’re doing this!” Lotte burst out. She spoke so fast that the words were almost one syllable.

Akko blinked a few times, and then looked at her. “What? What’s ‘this’?”

“All of this.” Lotte took a deep breath. “Between Diana and this whole ‘mentoring the first-years’ thing, it’s like you’re only hanging out with us when it’s time to sleep. Sometimes, not even then! I feel like this is the first time I’ve gotten to really talk to you since the school year started, and it’s been days!” She shook her head, almost angrily. “And Sucy won’t say it, but I know she feels the same way. We… we miss you.”

“What?” Akko laughed. “No, we still spend plenty of time together! Like…. Actually, what about the time we….” The smile faded to a neutral expression, like summer turning to autumn, before finally resolving into a crestfallen winter. “I don’t know what to say.”
“Say anything!” Lotte took a moment to compose herself, then sighed. “Let’s just talk about… anything. Like… did you hear about the twist in the latest Nightfall book? Barbara and I couldn’t believe it, but it’s brilliant when you think about it! It turns out that due to time travel,” she said, leaning forward and smiling, “Belle is secretly her own—”

A bell rang on campus, and the fliers all looked toward the tower. So did Akko, and a moment later, she gasped. “I’ve got class in five minutes!” She gathered up all her textbooks in both arms and bolted. “See you later, Lotte!”

“I hope so,” Lotte called out behind her.

‘They’re going to win’

Tiff and Mani walked toward the training field, and Tiff’s voice was strained to breaking point. To Tiff’s eternal shame, she was holding a school-issued broom in one hand: the other was levitating Mani’s stack of mattresses behind them. “They’ve been getting up early to train,” she said, “and doing it again in the afternoons, and Alice can fly now, gosh knows how that’s possible—pardon my potty mouth—and the other two are really good! And we’ve got one person who can fly well, and I don’t even have my real broom!

“And they’re going to win!” Tiff chucked her school-issued broom on the ground, then realized what she’d done and picked it up off the ground, with a hurried, “Sorry!” All brooms were precious, even terrible mass-produced ones.

“You don’t know they’re going to win,” Mani said, her voice bright.

“Really?”

“Yes! Someone else could beat them and us!” Mani laughed. “That’s black humor, right? Char’s been teaching me. Where is she, anyway?”

“Truant again.” Tiff groaned. “I’m surprised she bothers getting up for class.”

The grass was crisp under their boots, but before long they were on the harder surface of the flying track instead. It was unclear why it had to be hard if no one was running on it (except perhaps Alice’s new friend): perhaps it was to deter crashing.

Speaking of which. “Okay,” Tiffany said, “you and I are going to fly together this time. Hopefully, hopefully, I can help fix you.”

“Fix me?”

“Fix your issue.”

“Oh. How?”

“Well… I can react fast enough to grab you, or use magic to stop you, if you lose control.”

Mani stared at her, levelly but without even the slightest bit of confidence.

“But let’s set up the mattresses in case,” Tiff said, waving her wand. The mattresses flew into place. “All right.” Tiff hopped onto her broom and entered the air. “Go whenever, and I promise, I’ll—”

Without breaking eye contact, Mani went.
“Please don’t make promises you can’t keep,” Mani mumbled, as Tiffany extricated her from one of the mattresses.

“Sorry! I really thought I had you! Sorry!” Tiffany was cringing the whole time.

“Can you please practice on your own?” Mani asked, as they returned unsteadily to the track. “Maybe I can watch you, and… pick up tips! As opposed to picking up concussions,” she added bitterly.

Tiff sighed, but there was really no reason to put it off any longer. She’d already lowered herself to using this broom in flight class—and indeed lowered herself to going to flight class, as though she needed it—but this was in her own time. It felt different, somehow. “Tia freyre,” she muttered.

“Stop!”

Tiff and Mani both looked over at the approaching figure. It was Char in her hammock, holding a third broom above her head. “Did some searching,” Char said, gliding closer. “Asked around. This is the best broom the school’s got. Tiff, try it.”

Tiffany wasn’t sure she liked the way that last sentence ended in a giggle. Nevertheless she dismounted her broom, strode forward, and accepted the one Char was holding. “I’ll be the judge of that,” she said. “Tia freyre?”

The broom went up. But it did so in the fashion of a hundred-year-old elevator, with many a creak and groan. Tiffany was airborne within fifteen seconds. “What’s going on?” she asked, leering.

“Don’t worry about it. Try it out.” Char flapped a hand.

“All right…” Tiffany leaned forward. The broom didn’t, and Tiffany fell over the front and flat on her face, her leg still awkwardly upon the broom. “Ow! Hey!”

She pushed herself up and looked at the broom, which was moving forward… then again, technically continents were moving too. She grabbed it and yanked at it, but she must have looked like a mime trying to pull a balloon. “Where did you get this?” Tiff yelled, hauling on it. “And why did you say this is the best broom ever? That’s a lame joke!”

“No, it’s not. Mani, you’ve been watching?”

Tiff blinked, and glanced at Mani, who looked confused… at first. Then light dawned on her face. “I think I see now!” she said, and bounded forward toward the broom. “Please let go, Tiff!”

“Wha?” Tiff let go anyway, and Mani took the broom and spun it around easily before mounting it. She pointed it at the mattresses, leaned forward, and….

She was off! But not quite like a shot. “Whoa!” she said, and pulled back, and screeched to a stop just before the mattresses. “Yes! This is amazing!”

“The broom was gonna get chucked out,” Char said, as Tiffany stared. “Fibers misaligned or something, I dunno. Too slow for anyone to ride. I figure, Mani rides too fast, maybe they’d kinda cancel.” She lifted her hat and winked, eyes twinkling. “I said it was the best broom ever. Never said it was the best for you.”

Tiffany frowned. “This doesn’t fix her problem.”

“We’ve got, like, two days before this relay race. Whatever problem Mani’s got, I don’t think we
can fix it by then."

“I don’t like it.”

“Well, I do. So does Mani. Outvoted, mate.”

Tiffany sighed, but Mani was indeed jumping for joy, and aimed a kick at the mattresses, knocking them over like dominos. “Fine,” she said. “I don’t suppose you also found a broom that was the equal of the Shooting Star, about to be thrown away?”

“Well, I didn’t look that hard.” Char yawned. “Lemme know when you need me.”

Tiffany sighed, and pulled a ring from within her sleeve. “That’s right now. We need to start practicing baton passes.”

“Ugh. Effort.”

“I know, Char. I know.” But Tiff looked out, a smile coming to her face. She could beat Alice. She could win.

If she could find her broom.

Homework was hard.

This was a general statement as part of Akko’s life, but it usually wasn’t this true. Sitting in the library, she stared at a passage on the effect of carbonation in potions, and felt like she’d read it before.

_Sucy and I don’t like that you’re doing this!_

Oh, silly her. That was where she’d read it before—five seconds earlier. She’d just reread the same sentence several times without noticing.

_We miss you._

“Can’t _focus_!” she yelled, sweeping the book off the desk in a dramatic motion—then gasping, and diving for it before it could slam on the ground in the quiet library. “Dang, you’re good, Akko,” she whispered to herself.

But she wasn’t. She wasn’t good. A _good_ witch wouldn’t be so helpless toward a problem as simple as this one: how to keep up a friendship with her own _roommates_. How to stop it from disappearing.

If only there was someone she knew who’d had the same problem.

“Professor Chariot! I need to talk to you!”

Akko’s banging on her teacher’s door was, thankfully, answered without much delay. “Come on, Akko,” said the voice from inside.

She opened the door and bounded in. “Hi, Professor Chariot! Hi, Alcor!” she said, bouncing over to pet the bird on his head. She’d learned he liked head scritches.

It was so strange: almost nothing looked different since the first times she’d been in here, the room
she’d come to know so well. The bookshelves were still haphazardly stuffed with books, the sofa was still a little cluttered, and globes on stands still littered the floorspace: in short, it looked comfortably lived in. The only difference was that the smiling, tracksuit-wearing teacher who greeted her from the desk had red hair instead of blue.

One small change. And then again, one giant change.

“Hello, Akko,” Chariot said. She glistened slightly with sweat: perhaps she’d come back from a jog, as suggested by her tracksuit. “Pull up a chair. Is something wrong?”

“I’ve got a really big problem,” Akko said, flopping into the chair that Chariot offered. “Really big.”

Chariot’s hand went to her mouth. “Are you having trouble with a class? Do you need extra help? I can arrange to get you extra help if you need—”

Akko shook her head hard. “Not that kind of big.”

“Sorry,” Chariot said, just as quickly. “I shouldn’t have assumed. So what is it?”

Akko scrunched up her witch’s robe in her fists. “Do you remember how you used to be really good friends with Professor Croix, back in school? And how you grew apart?”

Chariot frowned. “Er… yes?”

“And then you got back to being friends, but the magic show thing and the Shiny Rod thing happened and you were apart again, and then you were kinda enemies last year?”

“Akko, are you going somewhere with—”

“Lotte and Sucy aren’t talking to me anymore,” Akko said, “and it’s my fault. And I don’t know how to stop it.”

Chariot was silent.

“I know you and Croix are friends again now, and I would really like it if you could tell me how. Because Lotte says they don’t see me as much anymore thanks to Diana and the mentoring thing, and… she’s right, I feel like I don’t have any time between that and classes and everything else, and they’re just kind of doing their own thing, and…. She looked up and sniffed. “Is this just one of those things that happens as you get older? You lose touch with the people you care about, and you can’t stop it?”

Chariot smiled. “I think I understand. Akko, once upon a time, you inherited the Shiny Rod from me… and now I think it’s time for you to inherit another powerful tool.”

Akko gasped. “Really? What is it? Is it some kind of time-turn-backer? Something that can clone me?”

Chariot turned to her desk and picked up a calendar, on which had been scribbled a meticulous schedule.

Akko’s face fell.

“Sorry,” Chariot said, giggling behind her hand. “I was a performer, after all. This sort of setup and payoff is my thing. But it’s tremendously helpful.”
“It’s just a schedule.”

“This one’s special.” Chariot leaned closer and tapped a light-purple Cx that was written on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of each week, with a time late in the afternoon associated with each one. “You see that?”


Chariot stared for a moment, then laughed. “It’s been a long, dull summer break without your leaps of logic, Akko. But think a little closer to what we were talking about.”

Akko rewound the conversation in her head. Crossing guard—schedules—what came before that, something about the Shiny Rod, and Sucy, and poisons, and… not poisons, Sucy and Lotte, and….

“Croix,” she said. “Cx stands for Croix. That’s Croix time?”

“Every week,” Chariot said, setting the schedule down. “Three times a week, Croix and I make time to do something. Practice some difficult magic. Work on a crossword. Eat together… well, not very together, with her globetrotting, but still. Sometimes we just chat. And I always make it, even if I have to drop everything else. So does she.”

“You have to schedule time for your best friend?” Akko grimaced. “That’s… so lame.”

“Maybe it would be better if I didn’t have to.” Chariot shrugged. “But I do. And it works. I think we’re closer than we’ve been in years, and honestly?” She smiled. “I couldn’t be happier.”

“Wait, wait wait. I think I get it. You’re telling me….” Akko scrunched up her face real good. “You’re saying I have to schedule time to have fun with the people I actually live with? I don’t need to do that!”

Chariot kept smiling. Eventually Akko looked down at her lap and muttered, “But not doing it hasn’t really helped me either…. But it’s weird!” She looked up. “Friendship shouldn’t be, like… like a chore! It shouldn’t be something you have to make time for, it should be something that just happens! Having to do it this way….” She took a breath. “It feels fake. You know?”

“Akko, whether you think of it as a chore is up to you.” Chariot stood. “My advice is to think of it more like… a skill. Something you can get good at, something you can practice. You know about that, right?”

“I guess….”

“And, if that doesn’t help? Think of it as a promise you keep.”

Akko looked up.

“I know it’s hard,” Chariot said, stepping forward. “You’ve probably never been in this position before, and it’s hard, and it makes you feel powerless…. But I promise you. If this friendship is worth keeping, you can make time for it. You can fight for it. Come here.”

Akko stood up and walked into Chariot’s open arms. “Thanks, Professor,” she said into Chariot’s side.

“Any time, Akko.”
They held each other for a few seconds more. Then Akko pulled away. Talking with Chariot always felt like a recharge: she felt so full of life and purpose now. “Seriously, thanks! You’re the best teacher ever!”

Chariot laughed, but looked off to the side. “Oh, I don’t know about that.”

“All right! I’ve gotta go talk to them! Bye!”

With that, Akko ran through the door, and down the stairs, and came to a dead halt halfway. She turned around, sprinted back up, and said, “Hey, Professor?”

Chariot, who had just been sitting down, jumped in her seat. “Er! Yes?”

“I mean it. You’re the best teacher ever.” As Chariot blushed, Akko frowned. “Please just say ‘thank you’.”

“Thank… thank you.” The words came out forced, but that was all right as long as they came out.

Akko beamed, shouted, “See you later!”, and ran down the stairs again.

Where were they?

She’d checked the dorms, and Lotte and Sucy weren’t there. She’d checked the lunch room, and they weren’t there. She’d checked the dorms again!

Still nothing.

Akko panted, leaning heavily against the wall. Hopefully she didn’t have to check the dorms again. Where else could they be at this time of day….

The track! Of course! She heaved her heaving body up and made for the field, but stopped before rounding a corner as she heard some familiar voices. “For the last time,” Tiff said around the corner, “no.”

“We’d do better.”

“I’ve read the rules. Each witch is allowed a broom. ‘A’ means one. Your hammock would be disqualified immediately.”

“Meh. I tried.” She heard the sound of someone, presumably Char, getting up to walk away.

“Wait!” This was Tiff’s voice again, and it sounded less clipped this time. “Can I talk to you about something else?”

“Sure. Not going anywhere fast.”

“It’s… you know Alice, right?”

“Mm. Your childhood friend. The one who’s kind of a… remember how I was gonna call you Fanny, because you’re a butt?”

“I am not a butt! You took that back!”

“Whatever. The point is, that’s not actually the part of anatomy that ‘fanny’ means, but big sis Akko was there and I didn’t want to swear. And I’m glad that I saved the name for later, because
Alice is a right—"

Akko didn’t know this word, and resolved to look it up later. Did it start with a C, or a K? “Kuh,” she whispered, sounding it out. “Ent.”

Tiffany gasped: she seemed to know what it meant. “You can’t say that! That’s my best friend—”

“She’s so needy she ran away when she saw you with new mates, and then right away got new besties of her own. We’ve got an excuse, what with how we almost died and all. She doesn’t. Do you think you’re, like, betraying her or something?”

Tiffany was quiet. Akko imagined a nod.

“Way I see it, it’s the other way round.” Akko heard slow footsteps departing the scene, and the sound of feet being dragged: thankfully in the opposite direction from her corner. “She’s wrong. Let her apologize to you. But don’t force it.”

Akko shoved a hand in her mouth to stop herself from crying out. That was the worst advice—it had to be if it contradicted Chariot’s advice about fighting for friendship—that she’d ever heard. But she managed to remain silent, as Char’s footsteps slowly faded away.

Tiff did not. A sliding sound came from her, followed by a mild thump, as she probably slid down the wall while leaning against it and sat on the floor. Akko could hear her frustration in the long, sucking breaths she took.

Akko backed up, as quietly as possible, halfway down the hallway. Then she walked forward at a jaunty step, and turned right, and gasped. “Hi, Tiff! What are you doing here?”

Tiff glanced up at her. “Sitting.”

“That’s cool! You’re doing a great job!” Akko cursed at herself inwardly, using the new probably-a-curse word she’d just learned. You’re doing a great job? Still, it wasn’t wrong: Tiffany glowered resolutely down at the floor, and looked ready to spend the rest of the day rooted to that spot.

“Anyway,” Akko said, “is there anything you need to talk about? You look kind of… bothered.”

“I am not bothered.” Tiff took a deep breath and made a valiant, failed effort to recompose her features. Akko was reminded of a time when she’d tried to solve a Rubik’s Cube of Lotte’s, gotten it more disordered instead, and thrown it on the floor: Tiff looked angrier with her mouth in a line than she did with it in a frown. “But thank you for your attention.”

“No problem! I am great at attention! Just let me know if you need anything.” She started walking away as slowly as possible. “You’ve got my phone number, right?”

“Right.”

“Bye!”

“Bye.”

“I’m really going!” Akko went a little farther. Just a bit more, and she’d well and truly have to leave Tiff alone in her time of need—

“Wait!”

There was the cue. Akko froze mid-step, then spun around. “Yes?”
“I do actually have something to ask you.”

“Oh?” Akko queued up the advice in her head: don’t push Alice away, you two were friends since childhood, there’s no reason a week at a new school should change that, and love and friendship can win the day—

“How did you tame the Shooting Star?”

Akko’s train of thought crashed. “What?”

“I can’t find it anywhere, and it’s been days!” Tiff stood rudely to her feet, scraping against the wall. “I don’t know if it’s even around—it could literally be halfway around the world by now. By two days ago! And I need it if I wanna make sure I beat—make sure I win the relay race,” she corrected. “The school brooms aren’t good for me, and my old broom is still out being repaired.”

“Oh,” Akko said. “Can you repeat some of that?”

Tiffany glared at her, and then said in a tone of great deliberation, “Why did the Shooting Star choose you? Because I don’t know why it chose me.”

Akko scratched her neck. “Well, it’s more like I chose it.”

Tiffany squinted. “No, I saw the footage! You were falling, and—”

“Not then! Way before. This was a different thing.” Akko leaned in. “Remember how I told you the Shooting Star was chained up in a pawn shop?” She saw Tiff’s hands balling into fists at the reminder, and pressed on, “Well, that was about this time last year, at the relay race. And one of my friends went and, uh… stole the Shooting Star. Unsuccessfully. She wasn’t able to ride it, it flung her off. And it escaped and, uh… knocked my broom out from under me? It’s not big on other brooms for some reason.”

“But you were able to ride it? How?”

“I fired myself out of a cannon and caught it and tied myself to it with the chain.”

Tiff blinked.

“I bet you think that sounds really horrible,” Akko said, scratching her neck again, “but… I mean, it’s a broom, I don’t know it that well. But I think that real determination is the only thing it respects. And I really wanted to win that race.” She laughed. “Got a photo finish, too! But Diana took the win, and I came in second.”

Tiffany was losing focus, Akko realized, which meant Akko must have been getting off track. “The point is. The point is… I’ve seen you. I know you’re determined. Why aren’t you using that?”

Tiffany didn’t respond here either, and Akko forced herself to stop talking. “So,” Tiff finally said, “what’s your actual advice?”

“Have you been looking for it?”

“I’ve been calling for it….”

“Then go out and look for it.” Akko flashed a smile. “Oh, and as some general race-winning advice?” She leaned in and grabbed Tiff’s shoulders, and looked her real hard in the eye. “Cheat
like hell.”

“Wha.”

“I shot myself out of a cannon and couldn’t fly under my own power. I placed second. As long as you make the ring passes where you should, no one cares. So cheat like there’s no tomorrow.”

Akko stood up. She still had Sucy and Lotte to find. “I hope that helps! I’m rooting for you!”

For the second time that day, she turned and ran away. For the second time that day, she stopped partway and doubled back, where Tiffany seemed to be having a tough time digesting the advice. “Hey,” Akko said, “you know that if there’s anything else you wanna talk about, I’m here, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, gotta go. Find that broom! Cheat a lot! Rooting for you!”

Akko stopped running once she was around another corner and out of Tiff’s sight, and not for lack of breath. She sighed… There was nothing she could do if Tiff didn’t want to talk to her about this Alice business. And she wasn’t sure she had the time to help, anyway.

Not when she had a friendship or two of her own to repair.
Social Mobility (3)

The race couldn’t have happened on a nicer day.

Well, “nice” was a matter of perspective: it certainly couldn’t have happened on a brighter one. Tiffany glowered at the sky through puffy eyes, wishing there could be more clouds and less glare.

She’d spent all last night searching for the darn broom! She’d scoured the grounds of the academy, taking care not to be seen in case it was disallowed to be flying after dark—she wasn’t sure—and hadn’t seen a hint of red. She’d checked the internet to see if anyone had spotted it worldwide—in which case she’d have been willing to take a leyline halfway around the world—and to no avail.

Maybe that meant the Shooting Star was still on the grounds, but this was a broom that could fly around the world in a day. It could be sunning itself in Tahiti for all she knew.

She glanced down at her school-issued broom with the black tassel around it and grumbled, as Professor Nelson finished explaining the rules in front of her: she still didn’t have the hang of this broom. The balance was all wrong. If only….

“All right,” Nelson bellowed, “racers to your places!”

Why had the Shooting Star left? Come to think of it, a little threat like Professor Finnelan’s didn’t seem like enough: it could surely dodge whatever she could throw at it, right? That didn’t seem like reason enough to bail for almost a week.

“Yo, Tiff? You going?”

Tiffany blinked, and turned back to Char, who held her ‘broom’. Which was to say she held two brooms, with the hammock between them, held closely enough together that they looked like a single entity. Tiffany might have given into Akko’s advice about ‘cheating like hell’, but she felt she needed to insist on that level of cover-up.

“Sorry,” Tiff said, looking at Char and then past her to where Mani was standing, holding her broom and covered in band-aids. Even with the new broomstick, Mani didn’t exactly have full control: she rode hard and crashed often. “I was thinking about something else.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Char clapped her on the shoulder. “If you’re as good at flying as you keep saying, this’ll be a breeze. But we gotta get going.”

“All right. Tia freyre,” Tiff muttered.

Char repeated it, and the two of them went airborne, but Mani said nothing. “Mani?” Tiff asked.

Mani smiled, like a stress fracture in her face. “How about I just jog over there instead.”

“Better run quick,” Char said.

Tiff glanced forward and saw Alice’s team flying toward the starting lines. She grimaced.

Why did the Shooting Star leave?

“There you are!”
Lotte and Sucy, several rows down from the top of the stands, turned around. Akko panted as she trudged down the stands from the top, where the second-and-third year students were watching the beginning of the broom race.

“Where,” Akko panted, “have you been?” She plunked down heavily beside her friends. Lotte stared intently back, while Sucy just maintained her usual dull-eyed look. “I’ve been looking all over for you,” Akko said. “All day yesterday and today! What were you doing?”

“Setting up for potion testing.”

“Trying to talk Sucy out of potion testing.”

“Oh, that’s fair.” Akko sighed. “I guess I can’t complain about not being able to find you, after… look, I’m sorry. I know I haven’t been around much. It’s hard to find time! But I’ve decided to make it up to you,” she finished, pulling a sheet of paper from her pocket.

Lotte took it and read it. “Is this… a registration form for the second-years’ relay race? Did you sign us up again without telling us?”

“I can cancel if you don’t want to!” Akko waved her hands frantically, placatingly. “I just thought it would be some real nice us-time! I know it’s kinda last minute, and I know we don’t get a cool photo next to Chariot’s if we win, and you don’t get a poison from Professor Lukić, but—”

Sucy raised a finger to Akko’s lips. “Do we still get to cheat?” she said.

Akko stared at the finger, cross-eyed. Then she grinned. “We’re gonna cheat our hearts out.”

Sucy was quiet for a minute, and looked out at the field—or rather at the screen hovering in front of it. Last year, only a radio had been present to commentate the parts of the race the bleachers couldn’t see, but this time, Professor Croix had set up camera-droids and this screen.

Akko was beginning to worry that this screen would be the only way she’d see any races this year, just when Sucy thrust a fist out. “I’m in.”

Akko put her fist on it as well. Then she looked up at Lotte. “I promise I’m gonna make a lot more time for you guys. I’ve even got it on a schedule. Are you willing to help?”

Lotte sighed, then put her hand in too. “You know I’m always ready to help.”

“All right! One, two, three!” Akko, Sucy, and Lotte thrust their hands down twice, then threw them skyward on the third beat—just in time for Akko to surge forward and grab them both in a hug. “You two are the best!”

“Thanks,” Lotte said. Sucy just grunted, but Akko knew she was happy about it. “But,” Lotte continued, “how long until the second year relay race?”

“Oh, about twenty minutes,” Akko said. “Why?”

They were quiet for a moment.

“Oh,” Akko said, “we’ve got to get our brooms. I didn’t think this through.”

“Just like old times.” Sucy stood and glided down the stands. “I’ll get some cheat-worthy potions. You two can get our brooms.”

Akko beamed. “All right! Come on, Lotte!” Without further ceremony she grabbed Lotte’s wrist
and dragged her behind as she ran down.

“Akko, slow down!”

*Just* like old times.

Tiff reached the final starting line, the one for the third leg of the race, and dismounted on the tower.

Alice was already there.

Tiffany shied away, squinting at her. Alice sat on the precipice unlike the other standing witches, but she was sitting *upright*. That was more energy than Tiff had seen from her in six years. Not to mention, there were a bunch of needles sticking out of her back: also different from six years ago.

*She’s in the wrong. Wait for her to apologize.*

Tiff shook her head. If she wasn’t going to be delicate about looking for this broom, she wasn’t going to be delicate about this either. She bounded forward and sat next to Alice, and looked at her, and saw Alice glance her way for a moment—just long enough to see who it was—then look decisively away.

“Hey,” Tiff said, “have you seen a red broom anywhere? Flies itself, fiercely independent, answers to ‘Shooting Star’?”

Her words were jovial. Alice’s reply was nonexistent.

“Um. Let me know if you do, okay? It’s kind of important to me.”

More nothing from Alice, except perhaps an inclination of the eyebrow Tiff could see.

“It’s really great to see you weren’t sick again. I hope it holds out for the race—”

“Do you?” Alice muttered.

Tiffany blinked a few times. “Do I what? Do I hope it holds out? Of course I do.”

“Do you remember when we were kids, and I was in the hospital the first time?” Alice’s voice kept its low, biting tone. “And you made a promise you’d find a way to help me?”

“Yes! I spent *hours, days* in the library, looking up stuff—”

“Why did you lie?”

Tiff’s jaw went slack.

“I *just* met Rain and Ximena, and they’ve already *helped* me more than you ever did. Because you weren’t trying to *help* me, you were trying to *fix* me. Like I’m just a problem you have.”

“What?” Tiff felt cold in her chest. “Alice, what are you… of course not! Of course I don’t think you’re a problem! I was trying to fix the problem *you* have!”

“Well, maybe it *can’t* be fixed!” Alice finally rounded on her, making eye contact. “And maybe being *fixed* wasn’t what I needed! And you were too *stupid* to realize what I *did* need, which was someone who wasn’t going to leave me behind!”
“Leave you—” Tiff felt her face roil with anger, and went to her feet. “You left me behind! I’m the one who’s been trying to say sorry, I’ve been trying to talk to you, and you just went and found new friends to spite me! I’m trying, Alice, but you just don’t care!”

“You’re right! I don’t!” Alice went to her feet as well.

“Then I guess we’re done here!”

“Obviously!”

“Good!” Tiffany spun around and walked away. Behind her, the sound of footsteps told her Alice was doing the same. “And for the record,” Tiffany yelled, “I’m gonna kick your butt! You selfish jerk!”

“Good luck!”

Char was right. Alice really was a fanny.

Tiff still didn’t know where that broom was.

“Welcome, boys and girls!” said a voice over the trees: an enthusiastic announcer witch. “Or, really, just girls! Welcome to the one-thousand, three hundred and thirty-fourth annual Luna Nova Cup Broom Relay! Up first is the highly-anticipated first competition for the first years! A chance for our freshwitches to show their stuff! Winner gets her photo enshrined for eternity!”

A quartet of disc-shaped robots rose into the air and formed a rectangle, and light shone from each one’s inside corner. The rectangle became a screen, and on that screen was an aerial view of the starting line.

“Last year,” the announcer continued, “we all watched an incredible competition with more twists, turns, and arguable-to-definite rule-breaking than we’ve ever seen before! Will this year’s witches meet that high, and low, standard? Let’s find out!”

Tiff tensed, and a red light flashed out over the field. The group of witches on the screen tensed as well.

“On your mark! Get set!”

The light went to yellow, and then—

“Go!”

To green.

The witches were off like a salvo.

Char looked to either side, then hopped off her brooms long enough to spread them apart.

This was way better. She plopped back on her hammock and sighed with relief, and sped forward with a renewed pace. It wasn’t fast enough, though: the other half-dozen teams were all jockeying for position, and she was at the back of the pack.

She slipped her hand under herself and extended her wand. Cheat like hell, huh?

“Nice day out!” she called out to the other racers.
One of the other witches looked back, and her eyes widened. “Hey! What kind of broom is that?”

“Pretty sweet, huh? Bet you wish you were lying down too, huh?” Char wiggled her wand back and forth, speaking in a dull tone. “Wish you could just be in bed, falling asleep, nice and calm… and relaxed… and limp….”

The other witch's eyes weren't so wide anymore. Her eyelids were drooping, and she wasn't the only one.

“So calm and relaxed and carefree, you could just doze the rest of the day away….”

Witches were falling limp, and shortly thereafter falling off their brooms. Most of them didn't even wake upon impact. “Hey,” said one, not conscious enough to be indignant.

“And almost all the witches have tumbled off their brooms!” yelled the announcer. “What, were they all up late practicing? Wake up, witches!”

Char smiled and pulled her hand from behind her back, resting it under her head. Easy as pie.

Almost. One witch was left: a tanned, muscular girl who was stiff on her broom and staring forward. This was Ximena, right? “Be the broom,” she muttered, “be the broom, be the broom….”

Too focused on the task at hand. She probably hadn't noticed the Sleep Aid spell, much less been affected by it.

Char shrugged. Well, she'd tried. It was Mani’s problem now.

“And they're coming into the first handoff!”

Mani tensed and looked behind her. Two witches were coming up from the rear: one was Ximena, but the other was a bit more recumbent and further behind. Char.

With a groan, Mani muttered the magic words and rose. Keeping Char in her sights, she waited until the hammock was past her, then eased forward as slowly as she could.

Not slowly at all, in other words.

She really wished she'd brought goggles.

“What are you doing?” she shouted as Char sped up to keep pace. “I thought you weren't supposed to—”

Char shoved the ring at her. “Worry later. Grab now.”

They were approaching the end of the handoff zone. Mani sighed, but swiped the ring.

Then she crashed.

“And Imani bint Abdallah al Kairouani, I hope I pronounced that right, is down on the ground! That leaves Rain Williams, improving on an easy lead!”

Mani grunted and looked up, shaking with discomfort. Rain glided through the air in front of her with the ease that trapeze artists aspired to, and disappeared around a curve. If this were a straight shot, she'd catch the girl easily, but….
Mani pointed her broom toward the longest treeless straight stretch of the curve, jumped up, and flew.

Into a tree.

Tiffany winced several times in succession. Mani, visible on the floating screen, kept crashing into trees. It was like watching a reenactment of a Daffy Duck cartoon.

“And, coasting into the second and final handoff zone, it's none other than the zippy hippie, Rain Williams!”

Rain pulled in, but Mani wasn't even in sight yet except for onscreen. Alice took the ring from her, followed by a deep breath. Then she stood. “Thanks, Rain! We're gonna win for sure!”

She kicked off the parapet and flew away, sparing a glance in Tiff's direction as she went. A withering glance, and one that was quickly departing: she flew faster than Tiff would have guessed possible.

“You're despicable,” Tiff muttered.

“What'd I do, dude?”

“Oh, not you.”

“Oh, okay.” Rain took out a needle and fiddled it between her fingers. “Good luck on the final stretch.”

“Oh… thanks?” Tiffany turned around, but the sight of Mani approaching fast cut her off. “Got to go!”

She took a running start and jumped over the edge, landing on her broom in mid-air. It was the optimal way to take off with maximum speed. Considering Mani’s velocity issues, she hoped it would be enough.

“Take it!” Mani screamed, her arm extended like a train with a mailbag on its side. Tiff stretched her arm out and grabbed it, grunting with pain as the hard ring struck her palm—but she'd made the pass. “Thanks!” Mani yelled, and promptly nosedived into the ground. “I’m okay!”

Tiff averted her eyes and leaned forward hard. Alice had gotten out of sight already, and she’d been going fast when she left: Tiff would have to work hard to catch up. Especially on a shoddier-than-usual, school-issued broom: she still wasn’t used to it, even after a few days’ practice.

She dove low among the mess of pillars before her, picking up speed in the descent, and then regretted it at once. With many a frightened exclamation, she bobbed and weaved as the pillars flew at her—as she flew at the pillars, more precisely, but perspective was everything.

Stupid Alice. Stupid new friends, stupid Shooting Star, stupid stupid stupid!

She weaved particularly hard at the last pillar, corkscrewed around her broom, and barely held on. This was all wrong. And, if she was being honest with herself—her pace slowed a bit—it wasn’t the broom.

Well, okay, it was the broom. Insofar as the broom was neither her old favorite broom, nor the greatest broom in the history of the world. But she should have gotten the hang of it by now! If
only she wasn’t so *peeved* by…. 

She skidded to a stop. There was a flash of red in the forest to her right.

“And Tiffany Vandergard, second place in the race, is diving into the forest and out of sight! Does she know something we don’t? She’d better, because the racers who fell asleep have come to, and they’re coming up fast behind!”

Tiff ignored the announcer’s fading voice: it wasn’t hard, with leaves and branches stinging her face every five seconds. But she was definitely seeing her quarry: a long, thin red shape darting through the trees ahead of her.

“Hey! Stay!”

It didn’t stay.

“Look, I’m sorry! I’m sorry, okay?”

She burst forward into a clearing, roughly circular in shape. The Shooting Star hovered at the other end. Tiff nudged her broom forward an inch, and as if the two brooms were connected by an invisible twenty-foot pole, the Shooting Star backed away by that much.

Tiff sighed, and looked down contritely. “I’m sorry, okay? I think I’ve figured it out. I think you’re… angry at me, for saying I would use another broom, right? I said I would, and that’s what made you fly away, not the professor’s threat. So, I’m sorry. And I….”

Tiff glanced up. The Shooting Star backed further away. “I was hoping,” she said, inching forward, “maybe you’d be willing to….”

It just backed away again. *Again.*

Tiff’s hand clenched her broom hard. “No. You know what? This is *stupid!*” She jabbed her finger at the Shooting Star. “*You* are being *stupid!*”

The Star froze.

Tiff was seeing red, and not just in the Shooting Star. “I am *trying*, you know! I am *working myself to the bone* just to *catch up to you*! But I get it! You’re the Shooting flipping Star!” She didn’t even catch herself that time, a part of her mind noted. She had to be furious. “If you don’t want me to ride you, it won’t happen! But you know what?”

She whirled her broom around, looking over her shoulder at the Star. “*You chose me*, in case you’ve forgotten! *You’re* the one who wanted to make this happen. So if this bond, or destiny, or whatever is going to work out between us, then you need to pull your *handle* out of your *bristles!*”

Not that this broom had bristles. But whatever.

“I’m leaving,” she said. “If you want to put in some effort toward making this work, I’m open to it. But I’ve got a race to win. I can’t hang around forever waiting for you.”

She plunged back into the trees, not sparing a look back. Then, thinking about it, she waved her wand and conjured up some goggles to protect her eyes from the whipping branches.

Somehow, flying on the borrowed broom felt easier already, as she instinctively weaved her way around the trees. Maybe it had to do with how her chest was feeling lighter.
And then she heard a second sound of tearing branches off to her right. She glanced over and grinned. “About time,” she muttered.

Tiffany burst from the trees and dropped the school-issued broom to the ground behind her. Then she leaned forward on the Star, and was off like a shot.

Like a shooting star, in fact.

The secret, as Ximena had said, wasn’t just in getting more energy, or getting tired less easily. It was learning what tired meant. What level of exhaustion meant ‘I’m being a whiny little quadriceps, and I’m good for another mile’s jog? What level meant ‘stop in five hundred feet or you’ll be puking your breakfast’?

Alice’s arms were telling her to let go and fall off the broom, but judging by how loudly they were telling her, she had another ten minutes at least. She gripped tighter with her legs to buy herself more time, and pressed forward. The track was in sight, and one loop around it was the finale of the race—

“Whoa! It looks like Tiffany did know something we didn’t!” The announcer’s voice was more enthusiastic than ever. “She’s just burst out of the woods riding the legendary broom, the same broom that nearly took Akko Kagari to a win last year—the one, the only, Shooting Star!”

Alice’s head jolted around to look behind her. That was a joke, right? It was some other broom painted red and with feathers glued on? There was no way someone would bring that to a broom race, right?

Except the announcer had just said it happened before.

“Does she have no shame,” she whispered, and willed herself to go faster. Leaning forward harder, putting more pressure on her arms—she’d have even less time now, but it would be worth it if it meant leaving Tiffany in her dust.

She kept glancing back. As she burst from the woods, Tiff wasn’t there. As she reached the track, though, Tiffany appeared in her peripheral vision, and was closing fast. “Come on!” Alice whispered to herself, and leaned forward even harder.

“Come on—” she heard Tiffany yelling behind her. “You’re the fastest broom in the world, you can beat her, she needs a mobility scooter, forcripes’ sake!”

Alice snarled, and went faster than she ever had before. She bent hard into the first u-curve, going sideways on her broom and trusting centripetal force more than her muscles to keep her mounted. But as she leveled out of that turn, Tiffany was right beside her. “How dare you!” Alice yelled. “How dare you cheat!”

“I’ll do whatever I need to do to win!”

They were neck and neck at the final curve. Alice kept to the inside, blocking Tiffany from taking the shorter path, but she knew the Shooting Star was faster even so. And her muscles were giving out: she hadn’t intended on going this fast.

“Ladies and gentlewitches, this is going to be close! Alice and Tiffany are a hair apart at most as the end of the race looms!”

Her hands slipped. She fell.
The finish line came up to meet her.

“And the winner is—!”

“Whoa!” Akko yelled, jumping up and down on the parapet. “I still can’t believe it finished like that!”

“I can,” Amanda said, stretching her arm across her body. “Saw it coming a mile away.”

Diana, beside her, nodded. “I must agree with Akko on this one! To think, after all that, the winner was—”

“Ssh!” Akko waved the two of them off. “I just remembered, this is supposed to be us time, not us time.” She blinked, then looked at the uncomprehending Diana. “To clarify, the first ‘us’ is me and Sucy and Lotte, and the second ‘us’ is me and you. And you too, I guess, Amanda,” she added.

“Oh. I see. What am I, chopped liver?” Amanda rolled her eyes.

They looked up at the floating screen, which displayed the first starting line. Lotte and Hannah were standing there, along with Constanze and a half a dozen other second-years.

“Go, Lotte! Kick the other teams’ butts!” Akko jumped up and down, fist in the air. “Woo!”

“Uh… go, Hannah! Do well!” Diana waved half-heartedly at the redhead next to Lotte, who was smirking with confidence. “Oh, who am I kidding. I’m not cut out to be a cheerleader.”

“You’re not kiddin’,” Amanda said next to both of them. She was stretched over in a backbend, limbering up for the race. “Here, watch and learn.”

She uncurled easily and jumped rhythmically. “Kick those witches in their pants, no one races like Constanze! Gooooo, green team!”

Akko giggled, still jumping. Then she realized something mid-leap and landed quickly. “Hey,” she said, turning again to Diana, “Have you had time to hang out with them recently? Hannah and Barbara, I mean?”

“Um… no. Now that you mention it.” Diana pouted.

Akko grinned. “You should make time. They’re your friends!”

“Well, I’ll do my best.” Diana smiled, looking up at the screen. Professor Nelson was shouting out the countdown. “I do hope you haven’t had Sucy attach the brooms to the platform again.”

Akko gasped. “Diana, I’m surprised at you! We would never cheat—”

“Go!” Professor Nelson yelled.

Lotte took off. Forward. Almost everyone else careened backward.

“—the same way twice,” Akko finished, grinning as shocked shouts sounded through the screen. She pulled a small vial from her pocket and tossed it in the air. “Reversal Juice is the working name for it. Realigns all the cells in the wood to be the other way, or something. Sucy’s invention!”

Lotte had a clear lead, but Constanze was hot on her tail, on what was arguably a broom beneath
her—at least by name, and general shape, despite all the technology on it. Honestly, though, trying
to mess up her broom was probably like trying to apply rat poison to a USB mouse. Hannah, on the
other hand, was sprawled on the grass behind the starting line.

“Well, I never!” Diana huffed. She crossed her arms, but she couldn’t cross her mouth, which was
clearly itching to smile.

“What’s so funny? Akko said.

“And Lotte Yanson takes an easy lead, as the other racers seem to have their brooms set to
‘reverse’!” The announcer’s voice was a little hoarse after the shouting she’d had to do last race.
Akko leaned smugly against the tower.

“But what’s this? She seems to be having trouble staying on her broom! And who can blame her?
Look at that!”

Akko’s eyes shot open. Either she was seeing things, or Lotte’s broom was getting smaller. It
shrunk to a child broom’s size, and then even smaller, until she was balancing on something not
much larger than a twig.

“Diana?” Akko said.

Diana hid her mouth behind her hand, but Akko knew there was a mischievous smile behind it.
“Just following your example, Akko.”

“And,” the announcer called out, “it looks like Hannah England has had a clever idea, and is
quickly making up lost ground!” The screen panned to show Hannah, riding her broom with the
brush in front. She was hot on Lotte and Constanze’s heels.

“All right, it is on! Go, Lotte!” Akko yelled.

“Show ‘em who’s boss, Constanze!”

“Kick them in the rear, Hannah!”

The three cheered together, for their separate teams. This might have been what adults called
‘irony’.

Rain kicked open the dorm room door, with both fists raised in the air and one of them stuffed with
enough ten-pound notes to fill a piggy bank. “Vercterrer!” she yelled, through a mouthful of
mushrooms. “Yerrrrgh.”

“Yeah, we won,” Ximena was saying over the phone. “Alice had the last leg, she did really well
holding off Tiffany—and Tiffany was, if you don’t mind me saying, on a far superior broom! I
guess our early-morning jogs paid off. And she only broke the one arm, falling off her broom at
the end!”

Alice chuckled, leaning against the wall in her bed. With her working hand, she held up a copy of
the celebratory photograph: Rain and Ximena cheering, and Alice holding the cup in her one good
arm as she lay on a stretcher. That had been one night in a hospital bed she didn’t mind earning.

“Yes, I know that’s one more arm than she should have broken—it’s okay, she’s getting better. Uh-
huh. You want to hear from them? Okay.” Ximena held out her phone and tapped the ‘speaker’
button. “Say hi to my parents, okay?”
“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Lopez!” Alice called.

“Herler!”

“Ooh, I should probably get Rain to the school nurse. I’m sorry, I have to go. Love you lots! Bye!”

Ximena pocketed the phone, then scowled at Rain’s bulging, overstuffed mouth. “I told you not to do that girl Sucy’s tests.”

“Wrth ert.”

“Yes, I suppose you’d think so.” Ximena sighed. “I’ll get you down to the hospital wing, in case you choke on some of those mushrooms sprouting from your… tongue. Eugh.”

She made to walk away, but Rain nudged her. “Ertergrerff,” she mumbled.

“What? Oh!” And Ximena reached out and swiped the photo from Alice’s hand.

“Hey! What gives?” Alice leaned forward indignantly, but stopped as a twinge of pain came from her broken arm. “Oh, oh, ow.”

Ximena and Rain had moved in front of her desk now, and were doing something she couldn’t see in front of their bodies. “Aaaand… just a second… there!”

Ximena and Rain turned around proudly, each holding a corner of the picture. It was unchanged, except for two big signatures on it: Ximena Lopez and Rain Williams.

Alice squinted. “What?”

“Frr yrr berg berk!” Rain explained. “Ther wern werth erl ther—”

Ximena waved her to be quiet. “We were thinking,” she said, “it could be a memento for your big autograph book. And you should sign it too!”

“I should sign it?”

Rain made a sort of ‘yeah, duh’ expression. Probably. It was hard to tell with a mouthful of mushrooms. “Of course you should sign it,” Ximena said, grinning. “After all, that’s the book where you keep all the autographs of great witches, isn’t it?”

Alice blinked, considering this as she took the photo from Ximena’s hand. “And now,” Ximena said, “we really have to go before this blocks her airway.” She hurried Rain out the door. “Can you pull them out?” Alice heard her whisper.

“Er trerd, bert ther jerst grer berk….”

Alice held the photo up, staring at it. Then she jumped to her feet, ignoring the twinge from her arm, and plonked it on the desk. Grabbing a pen, and thanking heaven she’d broken her non-dominant arm, she signed the photo: Alice Gainesbury. Then she bent down to grab her big book of autographs, heaved it onto the desk, and opened it to an empty page. A little one-handed enchantment was enough to make the back of the photo stick to the book.

Alice smiled at it. Here were the autographs of three up-and-coming witches. They were going to change the world.

She tried to close the book, but fumbled it somehow—she snorted: too disabled to close a book?
Instead of the cover flopping over, she’d turned the book to its first page.

An old, faded birthday card stared at her: the first autograph she’d gotten. It flopped open as she stared back, and she read the childish writing within. *Happy birthday to the best witch ever! From, Tiffany Vandergard.*

Alice growled and slammed the book shut.
“Since when do you have a sword?” Barbara asked.

Amanda pulled up her fencer’s mask, smirking, and gave the sword a few flourishes. “My dumb parents learned I was a badass swordfighter that one time at Appleton, and made me do fencing over the summer.” She entered a few forms in quick succession, each one clearly practiced, then groaned and slumped in a neutral position. “At least it’s another way to get in fights. Speaking of which—” She pointed her sword at Barbara. “Have at me!”

“What? No.” Barbara picked up her piece of watermelon, and was about to take a bite when the tip of Amanda’s sword jutted in to pierce it. “Hey!” she yelled, as Amanda flicked the sword, sending the watermelon in an arc that ended in her mouth.

Akko snorted. The nine of them—Akko’s, Diana’s, and Amanda’s teams—were out on the lawn of Luna Nova, on the first weekend they’d all been able to get together. Akko had just barely managed to organize it, but they were finally here.

“Don’t respond, Barbara,” Hannah muttered, not looking up from the fighting game she and Constanze were playing together. “It’s what she wants—hey, how did you even do that?” She growled as Constanze pulled off some sort of special spinning-kick move, winning the match. “Tell me how to do that input!”

Constanze rolled her eyes.

“I know you can talk!”

Another eyeroll.

Barbara frowned, and chucked another slice of watermelon at Amanda, who chopped it in half easily. “What do you mean, ‘have at you’, anyway?”

“Challenge me! I haven’t gotten in any fights since I got back!” Amanda shivered. “I’m going out of my mind here!”

“Most people don’t think of that as a bad thing,” Lotte said from behind her copy of Nightfall. She sat beside Barbara, at a card table with the watermelon slices on it.

“I’m Amanda O-Freaking-Neill, not most people! Come on, fight me!” She whirled around toward Akko. “Akko, you’re down for anything, right?”

“Pop pep pip poppop,” Akko said, smiling at Diana.

“What?”

“Popo pip pip puppu,” Diana responded, sitting beside her and looking into her eyes.

Akko flinched. “Uh, Diana,” Akko said, turning to her, “I think you were going for ‘popo pip pep puppu’.”

“So what did I say instead?”

“I... really shouldn’t say it out loud.”
Diana blushed.

“Are you even listening to me?” Amanda yelled.

“What?” Akko looked up. “Oh, sorry! I was helping Diana practice her Fish. What was the question?”

“Do you wanna duel me so I can justify the stupid fencing class my parents signed me up for?”

Akko frowned. “Pop pippo. That’s Fish for ‘no thanks’.”

Amanda groaned. “Isn’t anyone gonna—”

“Wow,” Sucy said from behind the other snack table, swishing a potion around inside a vial with a stylized flame on it. “Your parents cared about a special interest of yours and encouraged it. That sounds terrible.”

Amanda whipped around to face her, her eyebrows making a V. “You looking for a fight?”

“Yes.”

Amanda blinked. “Oh. Great, thanks!”

“Give me one minute,” Sucy murmured, and leaned forward. She and Jasminka stood over some foodstuffs of Jasminka’s creation, and judging by how the donuts were melted and spewing smog, Sucy seemed to be using them for testing. As Akko watched, Sucy yanked the cork from her vial and dripped it on an uncooked croissant. One puff of smoke later, and the croissant was a deep golden brown.

Jasminka beamed, then frowned as the golden-brown of the croissant wilted into a charred black. “Hm,” Sucy said, tapping her chin. “Needs a lighter touch.”

Jasminka shrugged, grabbed the croissant, and swallowed it in one bite.

“All right,” Sucy said, slouching around her table and toward the one where Lotte and Barbara sat. “Can I borrow this?”

“Can you borrow what?” Lotte said, before Sucy lifted the table and yanked off one of its detachable legs. Lotte yelped and leaned forward to grab the table as Sucy let go, before it could tip over and spill watermelon all over the ground.

Sucy tapped the leg with her wand, and it grew and changed from a medium-sized plastic shaft to a long, thick oaken staff. “Ready when you are,” she said, holding the staff loosely.

Amanda’s eyebrow went up. “I was kinda hoping for a sword fight.” She waved her wand, and a sword appeared in its sheath from thin air: she grabbed the scabbard and tossed it to Sucy.

Sucy leaned to one side, and the sword flew past her, disappearing as it hit the ground. “I don’t know swords. This is what I do know. You want a fight or not?” Despite her aggressive words, her tone remained neutral, and her slouching gait didn’t look at all ready for a ruckus.

Well, neutral if you didn’t know Sucy, anyway. Akko leaned forward: something wasn’t quite right here.

“Sucy,” Lotte said, still leaning forward to keep the table level, “since when do you pick fights?”

All eyes were on the two combatants: Constanze and Hannah paused their game, Barbara had put
down her book, and Jasminka wasn’t even eating.

Of those staring at Sucy, only Amanda didn’t seem the least bit concerned. “No sword, huh? Unconventional.” She bared her teeth. “I like your style! En garde!”

She leaped forward, sword outstretched.

There was only one word that Akko could think of to describe what happened next, and that was *pepapi*. Which was Fish for ‘embarrassing’.

Amanda hacked and slashed, driving Sucy back, or at least leading her there, but Sucy wasn’t even using her staff to block. She just walked backward—at least that was how it looked—and Amanda’s sword kept hitting the places where she wasn’t.

Akko squinted and looked harder. It wasn’t just *walking* that Sucy was doing: she was bobbing and turning, little movements that left Amanda’s sword swiping through nothing but air, millimeters away from Sucy’s skin.

Finally, Amanda growled and threw her weight into a horizontal slash. Sucy’s staff came up as quickly as a striking snake to block.

Amanda’s eyes widened, and Sucy grinned, and before there was time for any more facial expressions, Sucy’s staff whirled like a propeller. Amanda’s sword went flying, there was the meaty sound of wood striking flesh, and Amanda staggered back while clutching her wrist.

“*Pop pep pippo pip!*” Akko said excitedly. “*Pepapi.*”

“*Popo,*” Diana admonished, “*peppe pip ‘pepapi’ pip.*”

“Stop commentating in Fish!” Amanda yelled, backing away. She stumbled and landed on her rear on the ground.

Sucy advanced on her and pointed her staff at Amanda’s throat, still holding that devilish smile on her face. “You’re not very fluent in swordfighting yet.”

“Oh yeah?” Amanda’s bruised hand curled into a fist. “Then how about I switch to my native language?”

Her hips bucked, sending her legs into the air to wrap around Sucy’s staff. Before Sucy could react, Amanda twisted like a breakdancer and wrenched the staff from her grasp. It flew off and landed next to Amanda’s fallen sword. “Come on,” Amanda said, jumping to her feet and raising her fists. “Show me what you’ve got without that *staff!*”

She bolted forward on the last word, then jumped and twisted into a spinning kick with the heel aimed at Sucy’s head. Sucy ducked, but as Amanda landed, she conserved her rotation with a leg sweep that Sucy couldn’t avoid in time. She struck the ground face first.

Amanda laughed, and punched down at Sucy, but Sucy rolled at the last moment to send Amanda’s fist into the ground. Sucy grabbed Amanda’s upper arm with one hand, and the back of her robe with the other, and with a leg sweep of her own sent Amanda sprawling.

“Kick her butt, Sucy!” Akko pumped her fist, then sighed with contentment as Amanda tried to turn Sucy’s face into pulp. “I love having everyone together like this.”

Diana winced. “Maybe so, but we should break this up.”
Upon further inspection, Akko winced too. “Ooh, ow. You’re right.” This didn’t look sporting anymore: Amanda was yanking at Sucy’s hair, while Sucy was going for Amanda’s kidneys.

“I quite agree,” said a third voice, much colder than theirs.

Twin beams of light fired from behind Akko, catching Sucy and Amanda and surrounding each in a personal bubble. The bubbles levitated, drawing the fighters apart. Amanda looked up, her nose bloodied, and said, “Professor Croix?” She panted, each breath heavy. “How long were you watching?”

“I’m always watching.” Professor Croix’s hologram smiled, standing atop one of her disks with one hand on her hip: two more disks to her sides had their shooters exposed, clearly having fired the levitation spells. “In all seriousness,” she said, “I’ve seen more than enough to get you both sent to detention. Scrubbing latrines until your olfactory organs give out.”

Amanda and Sucy gulped.

Croix chuckled, and the levitating bubbles around Amanda and Sucy disappeared. “Nice handiwork, Amanda,” she said, as Amanda fell to the ground. “You should talk to Professor Chariot if you want to learn more about hand to hand combat. She’s the expert. And as for you.” She pointed at Sucy.

Sucy squinted.

“And you too, Akko,” Croix continued, her eyes gliding over Akko’s face. “But most of all….” Her pointing finger moved, slowly but surely, to settle on Lotte. “You. The headmistress wants to see all three of you at your earliest convenience.”

Lotte started, and looked up from the table she was still supporting. ‘Me? What did I do?’

“It’s not what you did, it’s what you’re going to do. Headmistress Holbrooke will explain everything, and she eagerly awaits your company. Later!” With a wink, her hologram disappeared, and the three disks flew away toward the school.

“Ooh,” Barbara said, grinning mischievously and supporting the three-legged card table as Lotte let go. “Someone’s in trouble again!”

“No we’re not! I… don’t think?” Lotte frowned, worry obvious on her face. “What does the headmistress want with us?”

Akko stood. “I guess we’d better go and find out. Later, everyone!”

Sucy, meanwhile, had pulled out yet another vial from the bottomless collection within her robes. There was an ugly blotch of a bruise growing on her face, just under her left eye: she let a droplet of potion fall on the bruise, then clenched her teeth and hissed as the potion made a sizzling sound. A foul smell burst forth from the potion, but the blotch on Sucy’s face went away, leaving only a faded bruise that looked a week old.

“Wow,” Amanda said, panting. “Where the hell did you learn to fight?”

Sucy shrugged, but tossed the vial to Amanda. “Thanks,” Amanda said. “We should do that again some time.”

“I’ll let you know.” Sucy smiled and walked off toward the castle, her head bobbing in its usual rhythm. Lotte and Akko followed.
“Okay, let’s see how this does on bloody noses,” said Amanda’s voice behind them. There was a puff, and then a sizzling sound, and Amanda started retching. “Oh my god, it smells worse than the latrines! It’s in my nose! Why does it smell so bad, Sucy?”

Sucy snickered.

“Let me make this clear, to begin with.” Headmistress Holbrooke leaned forward over her desk, fingers steepled. Croix’s hologram stood on one side of her, and Lukić sat at the other. “You three are not in trouble.”

Akko blinked. Then she grabbed her upper arm in her thumb and middle finger, and pinched as hard as she could. Then she did it to Lotte. “Ow!” said Lotte. “What was that for?”

“One of us has to be dreaming, right?” Akko pinched Sucy, who grimaced. “Maybe it’s me? Maybe it doesn’t work if I pinch myself. Sucy, pinch me!”

“Okay.”

“OW!”

Professor Lukić sniggered, seated in a corner of the room well away from the headmistress. “Very good, very good!”

Somehow, her inane laughter killed the mood faster than any disapproving glare could have. Akko and her friends stopped the pinching, and she frowned. “What’s she doing here, Headmistress?”

“She’s actually early for our next appointment—pay her no mind.” Holbrooke waved her hand dismissively. “In any case, I have an assignment for you, should you choose to accept it. More specifically….” Her flapping hand stopped, and she pointed her finger at Lotte. “An assignment for you.”

“That’s what Professor Croix said,” Lotte said, tapping her fingers against one another. “But I still don’t understand.”

“Not to worry! All will be made clear….”

Headmistress Holbrooke pulled open a drawer in her massive desk and pulled out a remote. She tapped it, and another one of Croix’s droids hovered over her desk.

“Er, Headmistress,” Croix said, her smile looking strained, “are you certain you wouldn’t prefer to use my presentation? The one I emailed you last night?”

“That’s what Professor Croix said,” Lotte said, tapping her fingers against one another. “But I still don’t understand.”

“Hah,” Lukić said with a snort. “Old lady doesn’t know about email!”

“You’re older than me, Lukić, so stop that nonsense—in any case,” Holbrooke continued, “I’m sure mine will be fine.”

Lotte’s eyebrows went up. “Aren’t you over a hundred—”

Holbrooke clicked the button, and a screen appeared in the space above the droid, projected into thin air. On it, the following words appeared in Comic Sans, with a swirl effect and a trumpet fanfare:
“Oh my god,” Croix mumbled, burying her face in her hands.

Tiffany had no idea what was going on inside the Headmistress’s office. All she heard was some groaning, some indistinct chatter, and then—at last—a loud, “We’ll do it!” Tiffany jolted upright at that—it was Akko’s voice.

Then she slouched over again, bathing in the stew of impotent regret.

The door burst open after a while, and Tiffany saw a few things beyond it: Professor Croix with her face in her hands, a cackling Professor Lukić, and the headmistress looking very pleased with herself under the worst Powerpoint slide Tiffany had ever seen (she counted three separate animated pictures, each one with its own background that clashed with the slide’s own background).

A little closer, though, were the three figures of Akko and her friends. “We’ll be there!” Akko said, waving back at the headmistress. “You can count on us!”

“Er, actually,” the bespectacled one said—Lotte, if Tiffany remembered correctly. “You said you mostly needed me for this, right? So why did you get Akko and Sucy?”

“Well,” Headmistress Holbrooke said, steepling her hands, “if there’s one truth I noticed over our previous school year, it’s that Lotte Jansson doesn’t do anything without Atsuko Kagari and Sucy Manbavaran by her side.”

Lotte shrunk a little. “Oh, uh… okay.”

Akko turned around and shut the door. “That was the worst Powerpoint I have ever seen,” said the curvy witch on Akko’s other side, the one who had to be Sucy.

Akko blinked, then glanced in Tiffany’s direction, then exploded into an energetic wave. “Hey, Tiff! What’s up?”

“Detention.” Tiffany looked at the floor.

“Oh.”

Tiff sighed. “I guess this is the part where you chide me for being irresponsible or something, right, R.A.?”

“Ehhhhhhhh…” Akko sucked in a breath. “That would be a bit… what’s the word for when you say one thing and do another?”

“Hypocritical?” Lotte said.
“That’s the one! I’ve been put in detention enough times to earn a free smoothie.”

“Or an expulsion,” Sucy added in that droning way of hers.

“Or that, yes.” Akko bounced back, smiling. “Not this time, though! I hope they don’t go too hard on you. See you later, Tiff!”

With that, she bounced away. And Lotte, well, she did more of a scurry. But Sucy... Tiff watched for longer than was probably warranted, as Sucy swayed her way down the corridor behind her two friends.

“Next up, Tiffany Vandergard,” called a voice from inside. “Miss Vandergard?”

Tiff shook herself. “Yes, ma’am,” she said, and drudged her way into the room. She took a deep breath, then looked up. “If I might say something in my defense, it’s—oh wow.”

“What?” The headmistress raised an eyebrow.

“Those hats.” And indeed there were nine hats—well, sculptures of headgear—on stands in a semicircle behind the headmistress. “Those are the hats of the Nine Olde Witches—or reproductions, I assume.”

“Quite accurate reproductions, in fact!” The headmistress smiled. “I don’t suppose you can identify each one?”

“Atikah.”

Tiffany pointed at the leftmost hat, then let her finger sweep among the rest. They weren’t in the proper order, but they were still recognizable. “Lucretia. Scarlette. Beatrix. Scholastica, Han Lanying, Tlahuelpuchi, Groa, and… Woodward, their leader.” She allowed herself a satisfied smile. “My mother had me memorize them, and—”

“Old hat!” Lukić cried out. She started laughing to herself, apparently without noticing anyone else in the room. This continued unabated for twenty seconds.

“Er,” the headmistress said, and cleared her throat a little as Lukić’s laughter died down. “We do actually need to get down to business, so… you were going to say something in your defense, dear?”

“Oh, yes.” Tiff cleared her throat as well. “It’s Char’s fault.”

The headmistress leaned forward. “Pardon?”

“I spent so much time getting her to her class that she made me late for my class. She’s terrible at getting up in the mornings.” Tiff frowned. “Or at any other time of day.”

Professor Croix gestured, and a translucent spreadsheet appeared in midair before her. She tutted. “I can’t help but notice that on all the days you were late—” a set of cells lit up in red, followed by another set in a different column which lit up green “—Charlotte Jones was on time.”

“Her Numerology class is at the opposite end of the building from my Potions class!”

“In any case,” the headmistress said with a little raise of her voice, “while I appreciate your helpfulness for your friend, the reason for your tardiness isn’t an excuse for it.”

Tiff stared at the floor. “Yes, ma’am.”
“Now, as it was Professor Lukić’s class you were late for, it will be Professor Lukić who decides the nature of your detention. Professor?”

Professor Croix and the headmistress both looked expectantly at Professor Lukić, and then—slowly, creakily—she got up. Leaning heavily on a staff for balance, she trodded past the desk, past Tiff, and to the door.

Okay then.

Several more seconds elapsed, and a wave of her staff opened the door ahead of her, and only there—after about half a minute—did she pause. “Walk with me, child,” she said, not looking behind herself.

Tiff glanced back at Croix and the headmistress, but they seemed just as confused as herself, so Tiffany followed Lukić as she left the room. She had to walk slow as a snail to keep pace with the professor, but she was an authority, after all. She deserved the respect.

They proceeded for about a minute, and just when Tiff was about to ask what the point of this all was—in a very respectful way, of course—Lukić spoke up. “You know what potion making is, reddened child?”

“Er... yes, professor.”

“It’s more art than science, yet more science than art. The challenge of making something more than the sum of its parts, yet the fact is, each part must be worthy of that sum! You’re a talented young girl with a lot ahead of her, but too many missteps….” Lukić tutted. “It’ll all turn out wrong, child.”

She was talking in circles. Tiff nodded. “Of course, Professor.” Maybe not so respectable.

“You understand, when I was a little younger, witches didn’t show up late to class.” Professor Lukić smiled vaguely, and continued in a similar rambling fashion, looking somewhere into the distance. “Education was the most important thing for a witch and we all did our part to make it happen, at the right time, with the right minds. All the right ingredients, you understand.”

“I understand, Professor.”

“You do, hm.”

“Yes, Professor—”

“You think I’m just some doddering old witch, don’t you?”

The voice was strident and clear. Lukić’s gaze, suddenly transfixed upon her, was sharp as a laser. Tiffany jumped back. “I—” she eventually stammered, “I wouldn’t say that—I mean, I wouldn’t say that!”

Lukić stared at her for seconds longer, with that gaze that made Tiff feel like an insect pinned to a board, and then she let out one of her long shrill cackles. “You’re more right than you know,” she said at last. “The Jansson girl and her friends are at the library tonight. You’ll go with them, won’t you, and help them with their trouble? Eleven thirty on the dot.”

She leaned in and tapped Tiffany’s nose. “And try to learn something in the process. You may go now.”
“Y—yes, Professor,” Tiffany managed. She turned tail and fled. 

“Oh!” Professor Lukić called out behind her. “And bring that marvelous broom of yours!”

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**Vandergard.**

It wasn’t a voice in the traditional sense. Which was to say, it wasn’t a voice that Tiffany heard with her ears.

**Tiffany Vandergard. Can you hear me?**

It was more like the voice she had in her head when she read a book, and she came across the dialogue of a character as beautiful as she was mysterious. A voice conjured up by no one except herself.

**Tiffany!**

Tiff jolted awake.

The curtains were drawn, but they weren’t thick: moonlight still illuminated the room. Tiffany groaned a little, sat up, and saw Mani’s peaceful sleeping face in the white light. She heard Char’s clumsy snores beneath her.

The Shooting Star hung motionless above Mani’s body, as if looking at the veiled moon.

Tiff frowned at it. “That’s creepy,” she mumbled. “Stop.”

The broom made no motion. Tiffany checked a clock at her bedside and sighed: eleven seventeen. Time to go.

She quietly let herself down from her bunk and dressed in decent clothes, then reached for her broom. She pulled, but it didn’t move. “Come on,” she hissed, “I need to bring you to detention! I’m not happy about this either!”

The Star held still for a moment more, then flew itself toward the door of the room, pressed its front on the doorknob, and opened the door; it wasted no time in whizzing out the door. “Come on,” Tiffany said, hurrying after it, “where are you going to now—”

She stopped, because the broom had too. The Shooting Star hovered expectantly before another window in the hallway.

Tiff raised her hands. “You can clearly open it yourself—” She grunted and let those hands fall. “I don’t get you.”

The Shooting Star tilted, as if listening.

“Just…” Tiffany rubbed her forehead. “You chose me. You’re some sort of super powerful artifact and you’ve chosen to hang around me, but I still have no idea why. Is it because I’m such good company?”

She glanced away. “And if I’m such good company, then why…”

Tiff shook herself. “Look, whatever we’re going to do tonight, I can’t shake the feeling it’ll be dangerous. Can I rely on you? No running away, no trying to hold me back, I just… I want to be able to know I can trust you, here and now.”
The Star tilted from side to side again, as if weighing this in its mind, and then hovered lower—low enough to get on.

Tiff flashed a small smile. “Thanks.”

With a wave of her wand, the window opened. Tiff hopped onto the broom—her broom—and soared into the moon-bathed sky.

At first, there was silence beyond silence—somehow more than a mere lack of noise. With only the scarred, quiet moon to light the grounds, and not even a whisper of breeze to sway the grass far below, Tiff was afraid to breathe too loud, to think too loud in case someone woke up. The Shooting Star, of course, cut through the air without even a whisper, as Tiff unconsciously let herself fly in a wide, lazy arc to see the school at its best.

Three towers emerging from the building, and another further off—impossibly high and spindly—that housed the Sorcerer’s Stone. All were black silhouettes against the light of the moon. Only now did Tiff allow herself a little sigh of contentment.

That was when she heard the song.

It wasn’t a loud song, and the words were nothing Tiffany recognized—indeed, the language wasn’t English—but in the silence of the witching hour, that song was the only thing to hear. Its source was unclear, and it bathed the landscape in the same way the moonlight did, to the point that Tiffany imagined that the moon itself was singing some mysterious lament.

Only that wasn’t quite right. As Tiffany arced toward the school, she found that the voice did have a source. Eventually, she realized it was coming from the very library she was supposed to be reaching. And so she followed the voice, like an obedient sailor swimming out to a siren.

A pretty grim analogy, when she thought about it.

The library wasn’t the right size.

Well, okay, in one sense it was the right size in terms of how this was supposedly the world’s best school of magic, so it made sense that the library would be absolutely massive with shelves as far as the eyes could see, white vaulted ceilings, etcetera etcetera—

The trouble was, she was pretty sure it was bigger on its inside than the whole of Luna Nova was on its outside. Come to think of it, Mother had mentioned this once when gushing about her alma mater, but it was a very different thing to hear about such a place versus seeing one.

So that was a little disconcerting—and it didn’t help that in this huge, multileveled warehouse of a library, the continued singing bounced off every available surface until its source was indistinguishable. Tiffany found herself playing hot-and-cold, doubling back frequently as she tried to approach the voice’s source.

It especially didn’t help that in this empty library, where the bookshelves cast long shadows in the moonlight, the voice wasn’t soothing anymore. It was eerie.

But not quite as eerie as when it stopped.

Tiffany froze as the source of the noise disappeared, as suddenly as a needle being yanked off a record. Several seconds passed in the library before the final echoes faded. Then Tiffany realized she was holding the Shooting Star so tight, her hand was turning as red as its handle. “Sorry,” she
whispered, trying to loosen her grip.

She turned a corner, walked two corridors forward, turned another corner, and came face to face with two glowing white eyes.

Tiff screamed.

The face screamed.

“Shush!” yelled a familiar voice, and Tiffany found a hand clamped across her face. A second later, she saw a matching hand clamped over the bespectacled face—oh for gosh’s sake, those weren’t giant glowing eyes, those were glasses reflecting the moonlight—clamped over the bespectacled face of the girl in front of her.

Tiffany looked down at the hand, then traced the arm up to its owner. Her eyes widening in surprise, she firmly pulled the hand off her face and whispered, “Akko?”

“Tiff!” Akko showed off a tight little smile. “Hi! Also, what are you doing here.”

“Er… oh. Did….” Tiff grimaced. “Did Professor Lukić not tell you I was coming?” When Akko’s face showed no signs of recognition, Tiff sighed. “This is my detention. I guess it’s probably your detention too.”

“Nope!” Akko puffed up her chest. “We’re performing a special service to the school! And in exchange, we’re getting special one-use-only get out of detention… free… cards…..” She slumped, eyes wide with realization. “Oh my god, we basically did get detention.”

“Akko,” said Glasses Girl, finally free of Akko’s hand on her mouth.

“For nothing!”

“Akko, please, keep quiet!” Glasses Girl grabbed Akko’s arm and shook it. “The ghost will hear!”


“Oh!” said Akko, no more quietly than before. She grabbed Tiff’s hand, and she grabbed Glasses Girl’s hand, and she brought the two together in a clumsy shake. “Tiff, meet Lotte Jansson. She’s the ghost expert on our team.”

“Wait,” Tiff said, and she let go of Lotte’s hand as soon as Akko let her. “Charmed, but wait. What ghost?”

“Oh, yeah, there’s a library in this ghost.” Akko frowned. “No, hang on, other way around. And we’re missing someone. Where is she….”

“No no, don’t change the topic.” Tiffany whipped around, feeling her heartbeat speed up. Was there something behind her? “What ghost?”

A grinning face flashed in front of her own. “Boo.”

Tiff and Lotte both screamed. Akko didn’t. “Sucy,” she said, hands on her hips.

“Don’t tell me you wouldn’t have,” Sucy said in a nasally, laissez-faire sort of voice, hanging upside down from the bookshelf next to Tiff. She swung herself down and landed on her feet with perfect poise. With the way her robe draped loosely upon the stone floor, she now seemed not to be standing but sprouting from it.
“Tiff,” Akko said, grabbing Tiff’s hand again, “meet—” Akko reached for Sucy’s hand, but Sucy snatched it away. “Meet… mee-ee-eet ….”

Akko kept reaching, and Sucy kept dodging. Finally, Akko sighed and let her outstretched arm slump. “Meet Sucy Manbavaran. She’s… nice.” She smiled like a novice politician who’d just learned how to lie.

Sucy snorted, then reached out her hand of her own accord and shook Tiffany’s. “Nice to meet you,” she said as if it was a joke, and she smiled. “And that’s Akko Kagari. Recovering idiot.”

“She knows that!” Akko said partway through Sucy’s line, and then she went as crimson as she could in the blue moonlight. “I mean, she knows the first part.”

“She knows that you’re recovering but not that you’re an idiot?”

“Sucy!”

Sucy smiled like she knew something the rest of them didn't.

Which, in fact, was true - at least in Tiff's case. “Charmed,” she said again. “Now seriously. What ghost.”

“Oh!” Akko smiled. “Well, you see, there’s a ghost.”

Silence stretched out. It was quite different from both the serene silence of outside, and the eerie silence from earlier. Finally, Tiff growled, and said, “And?”

“And… uh, we need to stop it?” Akko scratched the back of her head. “It’s just, the Powerpoint was really bad, and I zoned out. I think we all did.”

Lotte crossed her arms. “I didn’t.”

“Wow, really? Sucy, did you zone out?”

Sucy nodded.

“Yeah, so two out of the three of us did, so statistically speaking—”

Tiff tuned her out and turned to face Lotte. “So, there’s a ghost?”

Lotte sighed and started walking. Tiff followed, Shooting Star still in hand, not waiting to see if Akko and Sucy would follow. “Apparently there’s been a ghost for over a thousand years, almost as long as the school’s existed. For some reason, it’s never caused anyone any problems before… except that last week, a girl got hospitalized. You know Wangari, the announcer?”

“I think so?”

“She’s in the hospital wing with bruises all over her body, and a couple of broken bones. All she’s said was that the ghost did it. And—” Lotte looked down at her feet. “Since then, people have been finding library books… vandalized.”

Tiff gasped. “We have to stop it. Do we know what it looks like?”

“A floating book,” Sucy said from behind them, “glowing blue and flapping like it’s flying.”

Lotte raised her eyebrows and turned around. “Oh, so you did pay attention!”
“Nope.”

Sucy raised a finger and pointed. Tiff followed the line of the finger, just in time to see the glowing blue book—hovering at the end of the corridor—dart out of view.

Akko gasped. “After it!”

They ran. Tiffany started out right behind Lotte. That didn’t last: Akko quickly overtook her, and Sucy was fast on her heels, and even Lotte was a good runner despite her slight build. It was easy to get the feeling they’d done this before. “Wait up!” she gasped.

Sucy glanced behind. “You have a broom.”

“So?” In the semi-darkness, Tiff cried out as she almost stumbled over her feet: how was Sucy staying up with that long dress? Not to mention all the swaying.

“So ride the broom.”

“What—” Tiff found herself momentarily distracted. “What? We’re not allowed to ride indoors! It’s against the rules!”

“We’re chasing a ghost!” Akko yelled. “What do you mean, rules?”

Tiffany gritted her teeth. Stubbornly, she ran on—ordering her legs to keep pace with the girls ahead of her. Yet it seemed like the four of them—five, counting the Shooting Star—weren’t getting any closer to their destination, what with how they were running past identical rows of bookshelves.

She blinked. Come to think of it, this really reminded her of—

“Stop!” Lotte hissed.

Akko and Sucy came to a halt. Tiffany kept running until she’d caught up to them. To her dismay, it took several seconds.

Lotte’s hand was outstretched behind her, with a palm directed at the rest of them, and she peeked around the corner of one of the bookshelves. “It’s there,” she whispered.

Akko crept closer and popped her head around the corner too, above Lotte’s. Sucy’s head went between theirs. Tiff wasn’t tall enough to do anything but crouch low, so that she could peek out under Lotte.

The bookshelf wasn’t a usual one: it had a lowered section in the middle, forming a broad shelf with a plaque reading, “Our Illustrious History”. Tiffany recognized several artifacts among those upon the shelf: the wand of Jennifer, the Cane of Melissa (twentieth headmistress of the academy), and the cloak of Woodward.

The ghost-book didn’t seem to notice these items. It floated gently along the bookshelf across from the artifacts, as if perusing the titles, before stopping in front of a particularly wide volume. The blue glow reached out, and the second book floated off its perch, then splayed open, then—shuddered, as if being wounded. Little black things flew from the normal book to the ghost-book.

“What’s she doing?” Akko whispered.

“She’s…” Lotte peered closer. “I think those are words. She’s taking words from other books and
putting them inside herself.”

“The fiend,” Tiffany whispered.

Akko made a little gasp. “There is a library in this ghost!” Then she frowned. “But why is she—”

“She’s putting herself together,” Sucy breathed. In contrast to her earlier bored tone, she sounded very invested all of a sudden. “She’s trying to figure out who she is. Where she came from.”

The rest of them stared at her. Sucy glanced down at them, and then flinched a second later, as if something had startled her. “It’s obvious,” she said, a bit too quickly. “This is the history section. Famous old witches.”

A bit too quickly and a bit too loudly. Out of the corner of her eye, Tiff noticed that the ghost-book had frozen, and the other book fell to the floor. “She heard you,” Akko whispered, for some goshforsaken reason.

Lotte sucked in a breath as the book turned its spine toward them. “I should go talk to—”

“You should go talk to it!” Akko said, and pushed her forward into the corridor.

Lotte made a noise that sounded like “Eep”, and the ghost focused her full attention on her. “Hello, I’m Lotte?” she asked.

The book floated.

“I, um….” Lotte twiddled her fingers.

Sucy put her palm next to her mouth and hissed, “Sing at her!”

“Oh, right.” Lotte straightened up, sucked in a breath, and held it for a moment. Then her mouth opened, and she sang.

It was the same haunting melody from before, but now it was right here. Tiffany found her gaze affixed upon Lotte as the song started low, but steadily grew in volume. She didn’t understand the words—she wasn’t even sure if there were words—but she somehow felt she understood the intent. It was as if the song was asking a question: “Who are you?”

“What’s going on?” Tiff asked.

“She can sing to spirits and communicate with them,” Sucy whispered. “Obviously.”

Lotte’s song continued, and her voice reached a high note, and a blue helix of misty energy spiraled upward from the book. Tiff squinted and saw the barest vestiges of a face in the swirl—just two circles for eyes, and a blob below for a mouth.

Lotte cleared her throat. “As I said, I’m Lotte Jansson.” She sounded far more at ease now. “It’s nice to meet you. What’s your name?

The blob of a mouth moved as if speaking, but Tiff didn’t hear a thing. “What’s it say—” she started to say before Sucy’s hand clamped over her mouth.

Lotte tilted her head to the side. “Please don’t call me Mama. I’m Lotte Jansson. Um… what were you reading?” She picked up the book that the ghost had dropped. “‘The Founding of Luna Nova’, huh?”
She waited for a few seconds, but no answer seemed to be forthcoming, so she asked again: “Can you remember your name?”

The mouth curved into a frown, and little puffs of smoke fell from the spirit’s eyes. “Please don’t cry,” Lotte said, stepping forward. “It’s all right, my friends and I are here to help. Can you tell us anything about where you—”

The energy swirl went red, and the eye-dots narrowed in sudden anger. “No,” Lotte said, “I—I don’t understand. Why would I ‘abandon’ you? I’m here to—”

The spirit’s mouth opened, and it made its first noise: an ear-splitting shriek. Tiffany clutched her ears and fell to the ground in pain. Akko and Sucy didn’t.

When Tiffany’s clenched eyes opened again, she saw that even though its shriek had died down, the spirit’s mouth was still twisted with fury. The bookshelves to either side of it—to either side of Lotte, who backed up steadily—rumbled, and books started flying out to hover between them. With agonizing deliberation, their spines turned to face Lotte, and Tiff had a horrid vision of what would happen next.

“Get Lotte,” Sucy said, and Akko nodded, and they leapt into action as the books flew at Lotte.

“Veni!” Akko yelled, jumping out into the aisle, and the spell yanked Lotte back behind the bookcase by her midriff. Sucy echoed the word, but her spell struck the Cane of Melissa instead and it flew into her hand.

They all cleared the corridor—Akko, Lotte, and Tiff on one side, Sucy on the other—just in time for a machine-gun volley of books to fly out of it, thudding against a far wall. “Run,” Sucy said. “I’ll hold her off.”

“How?” Tiff hissed.

“Successfully.”

The bookshelves they leaned against started rumbling again, and more books flew out into this corridor. “Now,” Sucy said, putting just a bit more force than usual into her words. She stood in front of the array of books and tapped the Cane of Melissa with her wand, and it shivered with magic before lengthening—from a cane to a quarterstaff.

The books lined up in front of Sucy, ready to fire.

“What are you doing to the Cane of Melissa—”

That was as far as Tiffany got before Akko grabbed her hand and yanked her away. “Get on your broom, now,” Akko said.

Another shriek smashed into Tiff’s ears, and she looked behind her to see that the ghost had rounded the corner, and it appeared to have fangs now. She felt pretty well convinced. “Come on!” she yelled, and jumped on her broom, and for once she took off first try with no back-sass.

Tiff glanced under herself and saw Akko and Lotte running away beneath her, and behind them, the spirit flinging yet more books at Sucy. It didn’t seem to have enough: Sucy was holding her ground and blocking every missile with a spin of her staff, whirling it like a propeller. It was hypnotic, watching her from behind like this, and Tiffany lost track of where she was going for several seconds—
The spirit shrieked again and threw a solid wall of books at Sucy. Sucy reached into her robe and pulled out a glittering vial, and threw it at the wall—it exploded upon contact, burning a hole through the books. Sucy turned to the side, easily fitting through the hole she’d made.

Tiff was so entranced by the display that she almost missed the other vial, shining in the moonlight as it flew through the air and landed without shattering on a nearby bookshelf. It must have flown out by mistake when Sucy pulled out the other one. Tiff flew toward it—the least she could do was pick it up, right?

And then Sucy froze. Her staff stopped whirling, and she hesitated for several seconds before patting down the front of her robes. “No, no,” she seemed to be saying, “where is it? Where is it—”

A flung book struck her in the forehead, knocking her down. She barely seemed to notice, and flopped over on her front, scavenging the floor ahead of her for… the potion, Tiff realized. That had to be what she was looking for.

Tiffany swung around in an arc, leaned over to her left to snatch the potion off the top of the shelf, and yelled, “Grab on!” as her arc hurtled toward Sucy. Sucy looked up, her eyes widened, and she clamped a hand around the end of the broom as it flew past, yanking her into the air. Not a second later, several encyclopedias struck the ground where she’d lain, hard enough to shatter their spines.

As Sucy pulled herself to a sitting position, her eyes were still wide and panicked, still looking around desperately. “I found this—” Tiff started to say, holding the vial up.

Sucy grabbed the vial with enough force that her nails cut into Tiff’s hand. “Ow!” she said, as Sucy slipped the potion into an unseen spot inside her robe. “You’re welcome.”

“Don’t touch that,” Sucy said, her voice clipped. “Just fly.”

Right.

She did have a point. Tiff swerved to the right, then yelped as a thrown sword—who was storing swords in the library?—flew through the space where she’d just been. She dived low, down to the level where Akko and Lotte were still sprinting. “What do we do?” Tiff yelled.

“We need to lose it!” Akko pointed forward. “There! The doors to the stairwell upstairs!” She increased her pace, closed the distance to the door, and wrenched it open—

The ghost shrieked from within that stairwell.

Akko slammed the door. “Nope!” she yelled, running the other way with barely a second’s hesitation. Lotte turned tail with similar speed, and Sucy slid off the Shooting Star to follow them. Tiffany and the Shooting Star brought up the rear—at least at first, for the Star’s speed let it and Tiff easily overtake the other three….

It felt like gears were whirring in Tiff’s head. Neurons fired toward some conclusion she wasn’t certain of yet. Five of them investigating a spooky ghost in a haunted library where the shelves all looked the same. Lots of running, either chasing or fleeing the ghost. Shenanigans involving doors.…

Something in her head went ding, and if her broom hadn’t been self-propelling, she probably would have screeched to a halt. “Oh my goodness,” she said. “This is literally just Scooby Doo.”

Akko looked up at her. “What?”
They’d escaped, for the present.

After what felt like five more minutes of increasingly convoluted chasing, they’d all hidden on an outdoor balcony, holding their breaths until they were sure the ghost wasn’t following. Then they started heaving breaths instead.

“Sucy,” Lotte gasped, “where did you learn to do that with a staff?”

“An adventurous childhood.” Sucy sucked in a final long breath, let it out, and she was still once more.

Tiffany somehow felt as winded as the rest of them, despite how she’d been flying and they’d been running. “And what was so special,” she started, “about that potion—”

“More importantly,” Sucy blurted out. She narrowed her eyes at Tiff. “What’s a Scooby Doo?”

“Uh…. Hm.” Tiff frowned. “It’s Scooby Doo. How have you not heard of one of the most famous cartoons… ever?”

Akko let a little hissing sound escape her teeth. “She’s Filipina, she’s Finnish, and I’m Japanese, remember? We didn’t all watch the same cartoons as kids.”

“Right. Okay.” Deep breath. Rubbing her forehead with her thumb, Tiff said, “So it’s about these teenagers and their pet dog, and they go around and solve mysteries and run away from ghosts. It was my favorite show when I was younger.”

The three of them cocked their heads.

“One of them, Fred, was the sort of informal leader of the gang, and I guess I never really got why that was, since he was kind of dumb and his plans didn’t work.”

“He sounds great,” Akko said.

“There was Velma… she was the bookish one with the glasses. She was the one who seemed to have the best idea of what was going on… I don’t know, though, it sometimes felt like she didn’t want to be there. Oh, and she said ‘jinkies’ for whatever reason.”

“Jinkies?” Lotte asked, looking shiftily from side to side.

“Daphne was the pretty one out of the group… and I guess I don’t remember much else about her,” Tiff said, tapping her chin. “I think they gave her some crazy martial arts skills out of nowhere in the later versions, but other than that she was just really, um….”

“Why are you staring at me,” Sucy said in a flat voice.

“And—” Tiff stuttered for a few seconds. “There was Shaggy and Scooby. Scooby wasn’t a teenager, he was just this pet that could… talk for some reason. They never explained that. Well, maybe in some of the newer ones. And Shaggy—that’s actually a nickname, he had a real name but no one ever seemed to call him that—he was always with Scooby, he was the one who definitely didn’t want to be there and kind of had to be forced into it, and he was always the least comfortable with… oh no.”
“What?” Akko said, stepping forward with a concerned look.

Tiff buried her face in her hands. “I’m Shaggy.”

After a few seconds of face-holding, Tiffany sighed a breath in and out, then peered at the broom that still hovered at her side. “Which I guess makes you Scooby Doo… not an exact match, since you can’t talk, but fine.”

The Star tilted inquisitively.

She looked up to see the rest of them still staring at her. “Sorry,” she said, scratching her neck, “I just really liked those cartoons when I was younger. It was nice because it felt like they always won, and they were always friends, and nothing ever changed, and—”

“And I now regret asking,” Sucy said, turning away and slouching.

Tiff shut up, feeling a bit like a daffodil in an acid bath.

“Sucy,” Akko said. “It’s okay,” she added, glancing at Tiff, “everyone’s got something they still love from when they were kids. Or at least most of us do,” she muttered.

Sucy rolled her eyes away from Akko.

“So, back on track,” Akko said. “Lotte, you’re the ghost-thing-knower.”

“Expert. And—”

“Yeah, that. Tell us what we need to do to get rid of it.”

“Well, I…” Lotte bent down and picked up a book. “This is the book that she—the ghost—was taking words out of. And I think…” She unfurled the book, leafed through it for a few seconds, then nodded. “Aha. Look at this!”

They looked. The pages were blank. “Okay,” said Sucy, “real helpful.”

“No, I mean—look.” Lotte tapped the number in the corner of the book. “Page 137. And if we look at the chapter index for the book….” She flipped back to the beginning, and said, “That means the words she was absorbing were about….”

_The Founding of Luna Nova Academy_, read the chapter heading.

“I think Sucy’s right,” Lotte said excitedly. “I think that this ghost, whoever she is, is from the time of the founding of the academy, and she’s forgotten who she is, but she’s trying to find out. And if we can help her do that, if we can find her name, then we can—”

“Banish the ghost forever!” Akko threw her arms over Lotte and Sucy’s shoulders. “Lotte, you’re a genius! We’ll beat this poltergeist for sure!”

Lotte jumped a little at the sudden exclamation, but smiled. “Yeah, for sure.” Sucy gave a little nod of her own and patted Akko’s back.

Tiff just watched. _They always won, and they were always friends, and nothing ever…._

She turned away, gritting her teeth a little.

Nothing ever changed.
“All right, gang,” Akko said. “Let’s split up and look for clues!”

Tiff gritted her teeth a little more. “I can’t believe you just said that,” she said, turning back to face the group. “That is, like, the biggest cliche in the show, other than—”

“We’ll figure out who this ghost is,” Akko said, putting her hands over Lotte and Sucy’s shoulders, “and once we do, we’ll lure her into a trap!”

“—other than the traps,” Tiff finished, putting her face in her hand. “Which never work, by the way.” She sighed, then looked up at Akko. “How are we splitting up? Can I go with Sucy?” she added, almost under her breath.

Sucy rolled her eyes with such force that her head rolled too. “How about no.”

“How about,” Akko said, glancing sidelong at Sucy, “I go with her and you go with Lotte?”

Tiff sighed again and hopped on the Shooting Star. “Fine.”

“Then let’s get going!” Akko said. “Send sparks up if you need anything!”

There were two doors off the balcony: Akko and Sucy took the one to the right, leaving Lotte and Tiff with the one on the left. “Shaggy never got to go with Daphne in the cartoons, either,” Tiff muttered.

“What?” Lotte said.

“Nothing!”

Books.


Even at the best of times, Akko had never been a huge fan of them. Even one year after joining the academy, even after accepting (however grudgingly) that she’d need to focus on her textbooks to be a great witch, there were few things that made her zone out into daydream-land faster than reading a book.

And now she was looking through all of them.

“Nope,” she said, flipping through The Theory of Evolution in Magical Creatures long enough to confirm that it didn’t have any of its words missing and throwing it—almost throwing it. What if she’d missed a blank section on a page? She went through it again, slower this time, and verified that none of its text had been stolen. “Yeah, nope. Not this one either.”

She dropped the book and rested her head against the cool bookshelf, as if trying to drain out some of the sludge that filled her brain just by skimming these boring old books. “Having any luck, Sucy?”

“Did you know,” Sucy said from the other side of the aisle, holding a book in one hand and her borrowed staff in the other, “that the plant species Dendrocnide moroides is sometimes called the ‘suicide plant’, because the sting of its tiny needles is so painful that it makes people want to kill themselves?”

Akko sighed. “Does that mean you haven’t found anything?”
“I’ve found some fascinating books on botany. But no, nothing a ghost looked through.” Sucy’s book thudded to the floor with a sound as dull as her voice.

Akko sighed, and glanced along the aisle they’d chosen at random. Whole shelves of books were on the floor behind the pair of them. “This is dumb,” she said, smacking the shelf. “Why are we acting like the ghost is gonna put the books back after unwording them? We should just be looking for books on the floor!”

She kicked the shelf for added emphasis. “This is dumb!”

“Of course it is,” Sucy said, nose deep in another book entitled Nature’s Most Toxic Predators. “It was your idea!” She snickered.

Akko whirled around. “Stop it!”

Sucy’s smirk was just barely visible on the sides of her face.

“No, really, I mean it! Stop!” Akko’s eyes were narrow and her teeth were gritted. “You’ve had this bug up your butt all day about something, and it’s enough now!”

“I’m just being my usual lovable self.” Sucy stretched, holding the book above her head as if presenting it to a crowd. The smile was still there, but fading.

“Sucy, I do like you. But not right now. What’s your problem?”

And now it was all the way gone. “Who says I have a problem? Besides you.”

“Picking that fight with Amanda? Calling me stupid all night? It’s not normal, and it’s enough!”

“Amanda was literally asking for it,” Sucy muttered. “And we both know you’re dumb. Stop making a big deal out of this.”

“You were even mean to Tiffany after she got you back your potion!”

Sucy stopped moving.

Then, like some freaky clockwork statue, her head creaked around to look at Akko. “You saw that?” she whispered, her eyes pinpricks.

“Of… of course I did.’ Akko’s head tilted to the side. “I was looking behind me to see if you were okay.” Well, if she hadn’t been sure if something was wrong before, she sure was now.

Sucy’s stare continued unblinking, unabated, for several seconds. Then she whirled around and set off at a brisk walk down the aisle. “You’re right,” she said.

“I’m… what?”

“The ghost wouldn’t have put the book back in the shelf. We should get moving.”

“Wait, no—I mean, yes, but—don’t walk away from this!” Akko said, chasing after her. “You can’t just be a jerk all the time and not expect anyone to say anything about it, Sucy! Get back here!”

Sucy broke into a run. “Where are you going?” Akko called, forgetting for a moment the whole deal about wanting to be quiet so the ghost didn’t hear them. “What was that potion? Come on, tell me!”
Sucy turned a corner, several shelves ahead of her. Akko turned the same corner and saw Sucy standing there, looming like a scarecrow, staring right at Akko. She jumped.

“What is your problem?” Sucy whispered, eyes narrowed so that lines bunched up beneath her eyes. “Don’t we have something better to be doing? Like catching a ghost before it brutally bludgeons someone to death?”

Akko rolled her eyes briefly. “The ghost can wait, and you know that. But you … I don’t get you.”

Sucy kept staring, but the lines under her eyes started to flatten out. “I don’t get why you do the things you do,” Akko continued. “You’re one of my three best friends in the world, and I know barely anything about you. Isn’t that screwed up?”

Akko flung her arms up. “Seriously, what’s with that? I don’t know why you’re so into potions, I don’t know why you like being a jerk so much of the time, and I definitely don’t know why you’re being such a jerk tonight! So why can’t you just tell me?”

She took a breath. Sucy’s stare wasn’t angry anymore: it had become completely neutral. “Do you wanna know?” she said.

“Yeah, of course!”

“Do you really, really….?” Sucy took a breath, held it, and let it out. “Really want to know?”

“Have you met me?” Akko narrowed her eyes. “That’s the only way I’ve ever wanted anything ever.”

Sucy broke eye contact for a few seconds. She looked up at the ceiling, and seemed to be clenching her jaw, nodding her head back and forth. Perhaps lost in thought? Her lips moved, and Akko thought she lipread the words, “Had to happen sometime.” Before Akko could think to ask, though, Sucy turned away and… started perusing the shelves.

“What—what are you doing?” Akko took a step forward. “We were having a conversation, we were gonna reach a breakthrough and now you’re—”

“Read this.”

The book was shoved into her face so hard that if Akko had been standing one step closer, it would have knocked her out. In any case, she flinched, then peered around it to look at Sucy, but Sucy’s eyes were fixed on the shelf as if trying to bore a hole through it.

Akko took the book, which Sucy had opened to a specific point in the middle. With one finger keeping her place, she closed the book to look at the cover: Indigenous Magics of Southeast Asia. Frowning, she opened it again and started from the top of the left page.

… but most feared of all is the Manbabarang, practitioner of the art of Barang. In legends the manbabarang keeps his swarm of carnivorous beetles in a bottle or a section of bamboo, carefully feeding them ginger root. When the practitioner decides to employ his dark art, he performs a prayer ritual wherein he whispers instructions and identifies the victim….

“What the heck does this have to do with… wait.” Akko frowned, then let her eyes scroll back up. “Manbabarang,” she read aloud. “Man-ba-bar-ang — you’re Sucy Man-ba-var-an! This sounds almost exactly like your last name! Wow,” she said, letting her arm drop, “what a crazy coincidence.”
Sucy stared again, mouth slightly open. “Akko... no, it’s not a coincidence. If even a single person at Luna Nova spoke Bisaya, they’d have figured out that my last name... isn’t one. It just means ‘witch’. I’m Sucy the Witch.”

Akko’s mouth opened a little.

“Remember how I wasn’t planning on actually staying at Luna Nova at first? I only wrote Manbavaran down in my application letter so I could come here for a short while, I wasn’t actually supposed to... stay.”

Her flat look seemed to imply that Akko should have guessed this years ago, even having only known her for one year. “That wasn’t part of the plan,” Sucy continued, looking down at the ground. “You and Lotte weren’t how this was supposed to go.”

“But...” Akko was squinting now. “If that’s not your real last name, what is?”

“Don’t have one.” Sucy’s monotone sounded more tired than ever. “I only got a first name when I got thrown out.”

Akko blinked a few times. “When you got what?”

“Sixteen-ish years ago.” Still looking at the floor, Sucy reached inside her robes. “I got found at an orphanage. There was nothing but me, and this,” she said, pulling out a small vial, spherical in shape, which she thrust toward Akko.

Akko tried to take it, but Sucy didn’t let go, so she settled for looking at it instead. The glass was finely crafted—not exactly spherical upon closer inspection, but a near-sphere made of hundreds of tiny triangles, a miniature geodesic dome. The whole thing was half-full of some viscous green liquid that bubbled as if over a flame. The cork at the top had a pin through it, one which held a scrap of paper to the cork. On that paper was a faded message in an alphabet Akko didn’t recognize: something Asian, probably?

Sucy pulled back her arm. “In case you’re wondering, it says, ‘For Sucy’.” She swished the vial around a few times, letting the tiny bubbles burst within. “Whoever made this was some sort of poison-making genius. No one’s ever been able to figure out what it does if you drink it. Not even me, and I’ve been trying for ten Years.”

She returned the vial to the bottomless pockets of her robe, then straightened her head and looked at Akko. “Because that’s all I have of whoever left me there. That’s my only lead.”

“That’s why you’re so obsessed with potions,” Akko whispered. She took a step forward. “That’s why you never talk about yourself. Oh, Sucy ...”

“Please don’t hug me,” Sucy began, but it was far, far too late.

Akko enveloped her in a crushing hug, her face buried in Sucy’s shoulder. Sucy’s arms remained at her sides. “Why didn’t you tell me?” Akko mumbled. “Why didn’t you tell Lotte? We could have helped you!”

“Didn’t want to,” Sucy said, her voice a little quieter than normal. “You were too obsessed with your Shiny Rod. You wouldn’t have cared. You’d have...” She trailed off, mumbling something that sounded strangely like, “laughed at me”.

“I would never!” Akko didn’t let go of Sucy, but she did straighten up, allowing her to look her friend in the eyes. “You’re so passionate about this that you’ve been searching for it for ten years! I
would *never* laugh at that kind of dedication to making your dream come true!” She pulled Sucy close again. “And I’m not laughing now either, you hear me?"  

It took several long seconds, but finally, Akko felt Sucy’s arms rise up a little behind her. Just enough to gently touch behind her back.  

Finally, Akko pulled away. “If you want *any* help at all,” she said, “just say the word and I’ll be there. And… don’t keep this kind of stuff bottled up for a year, okay? I’m trying to be a better friend, I’ve got my schedule and everything, but it’s not gonna *work* if we don’t tell each other things!” She stuck out her fist. “You’ve gotta promise me, if this kind of thing is eating at you, to tell me or Lotte. Okay?”  

Sucy considered the fist for a few seconds, then bumped it with her own. “Okay. But we do actually have a ghost to deal with, so….”  

She turned around. Beaming, Akko followed her. “Seriously, though!” she continued at Sucy’s back, which—she noticed—looked a little less tense than usual. “What kind of friendship would this be if we never told each other when we were upset?”  

“Oh my goooodddooosh!” Lotte squealed, like a high-pitched and annoying bell. “A complete compendium of the Nightfall unabridged series! *With the original illustrations!*”  

“Yes, fascinating,” Tiffany said without looking, or thinking for that matter. She held her wand out in front of her, using a basic lighting spell for some illumination. The Shooting Star hovered at her side, ready for her to bolt at the moment the ghost showed up. Which wasn’t very nice to Lotte, perhaps. Maybe she’d grab the girl too.  

“Oh my gosh, it’s the original source of the continuity debate about Belle’s earring!” Lotte gasped so loudly that it set Tiff’s teeth on edge. She yanked a book from the shelf and opened it under Tiffany’s nose. “You see, this illustration from part one hundred and seven has her earring as *sapphire*, but the one time it’s described in the book, they say it’s made of *emeraldine*, a magical gemstone that usually comes in a glowing *green* color… “She petered off. “Are you… no, of course you’re not listening.”  

“What?” Somehow, Tiff could *hear* her shoulders slump. She looked around to see Lotte returning the book to the shelf, the motion showing less than half the energy her manic rant had done. “Oh, sorry. I was… distracted.”  

“I understand.” Lotte breathed in through her nose, out through her mouth, and then turned to face Tiffany with a bright smile on her face. “I know not everyone’s as much of a diehard fan as I am.”  

“No, not… not that.” Tiffany looked to the side. “I know not everyone’s as much of a diehard fan as I am.”  

“They always won, and they were always friends, and nothing ever changed.”  

“You three just seem really close, is all.” She turned away and started walking. “Let’s get moving. If we can find the ghost’s name, we can be out of here.”  

“No need to tell me twice.” Lotte laughed nervously, then hurried forward until she was walking alongside Tiff. “Are you okay? Believe me, I know this sort of thing can be frightening if you’re not used to it.”  

“I’m not frightened.”
“I used to be.” Lotte smiled down at her—even Lotte, the shortest of them, was taller than Tiff, and it was infuriating—and she seemed to be resisting an urge to ruffle Tiff’s hair. “Akko or Sucy, or both of them if it was a really bad day, used to drag me into all sorts of crazy situations. Well, I say ‘used to’—I suppose it’s pretty obvious that they never actually stopped.”

She stopped talking for several seconds, and they walked in a quiet measured out by footfalls.

“But the thing is, even if things were terrifying or awful or… detention, I was doing them with friends, so it wasn’t all bad,” she said at last. “But none of your friends are here—I know you know Akko, but it’s not the same—so I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay.”

“I’m fine,” Tiff said, marching ahead at renewed speed to outpace Lotte. “It’s just that there’s a ghost in here who wants to bludgeon us to death, and that is certainly enough of a problem to put a young witch on edge without any outside intervention. It has nothing to do with you, it has nothing to do with friends—” her footsteps were coming as stomps now “—and it has nothing at all to do with Alice.”

“I didn’t mention Alice.”

Tiff didn’t stop dead. She kept going out of momentum for several more steps, like a steam train whose boiler had imploded, before finally coming to a halt.

“Akko mentioned her. You know she’s really looking out for you, right?” Something about Lotte’s voice sounded like the warm voice Tiffany’s mother always used, when she wanted to get something out of someone. “Akko was really hoping you two would make up at the broom race last week. But… if it’s still bothering you, do you want to talk about—”

“I don’t know what I did wrong!”

Tiffany’s teeth were gritted. She’d tried not to think about it for a week, and now the dam was fracturing and everything was bursting out. “I know what she thinks I did wrong. And I know that she’s wrong to think it! I tried to help her for six years of my stupid life and then, overnight, she decided that that was a bad thing to do! And I’m supposed to be in the wrong here?”

She growled. Why were there tears in her eyes? She wasn’t sad, she was furious! “Literal years of my life. Actually two fifths of my life! And she just decides, oh, who cares about being cured of my horrible chronic disease when I can jog and get my back stuck full of needles!?” She threw her hands in the air with frustration, then slowly let them fall. “I spent years for her. And she just left me. Alone.”

She growled. Why were there tears in her eyes? She wasn’t sad, she was furious! “Literal years of my life. Actually two fifths of my life! And she just decides, oh, who cares about being cured of my horrible chronic disease when I can jog and get my back stuck full of needles!?” She threw her hands in the air with frustration, then slowly let them fall. “I spent years for her. And she just left me. Alone.”

It took a few seconds for her to recollect herself. Once she had, she saw that Lotte was several steps away, smiling faintly—a sad smile. “Sorry,” Tiff said, shrugging uneasily. “But thanks for… thank you for listening. I think that was a big load on my mind, and… it was good to get that off my chest.”
“Oh, no problem.” Lotte smiled, and started walking past her. “Any time. I guess it was a lot though. Jinkies.” She laughed a little.

“Oh, okay.” Tiffany made a little hm noise. “It’s just that I feel a little bad about dumping all of that on you—I barely know you. I don’t suppose there’s anything you want to talk about?”

Lotte laughed again. “Oh, that’s not how this works.”

“Beg pardon?”

Lotte turned her head and smiled back at her, just as sweetly. “I listen to other people’s issues. Not the other way around.” With the way the moon hit her glasses, Tiffany couldn’t see her eyes.

Lotte turned back around, turned a corner, and gasped. “Tiff, look at this!”

Shelving any thoughts about Lotte’s previous statement for later—or possibly never, who knew—Tiff hurried ahead. Lying on the floor at the end of a nearby bookshelf, she saw a gigantic book that had carelessly been left open. Even from a distance, it was easy to see the words were missing.

Not a huge number of them, though. “‘Each of the honored founders of this school left as their legacy a unique virtue, which Luna Nova has tried to cultivate. Whether it was’—” Lotte stopped reading aloud for a moment, for a word was clearly absent. “‘Whether it was insert-word-here the Affectionate, whose healing magic and kindness have proved an example to all who walk these hallowed halls; insert-word-here the Professor, whose patient guidance led many students to greatness, or insert-word-here the Motherly....’”

Lotte looked up. “Is ‘professor’ a virtue, or just a title?”

“Woodward.”

“Pardon me?” Lotte said, glancing her way.

“Woodward the Professor.. Beatrix the Affectionate, Lucretia the Motherly.” Tiffany snatched the book from Lotte’s hands and read the rest. “That’s Scarlette, that’s Scholastica, Tlahuelpuchi, Groa, Han Lanying, and Atikah!” She sniffed. “All out of order, too. Who wrote this tripe?”

Lotte kept staring at her.

“Do you not have them memorized?” Tiff stared right back. “They’re the Nine Olde Witches! They’re kind of a large deal! Or... do you mean something else—”

She looked past Lotte and jumped in surprise: there was another book on the floor. And another, and another. Tiff picked each up, flipped through them, and quickly confirmed exactly which words were missing.

“There was plenty of other stuff going on in the world of magic at the same time that the Nine Olde Witches were around. But this ghost isn’t interested in any of that.” She let the pages of A Chronology of the First Millennium of Witchcraft fall like a flipbook, showing that no words were missing from them. “Only in these nine witches.”

Lotte’s eyes widened. “Do you think....”

“It’s almost blasphemous to suggest....” Tiff gasped. “The ghost we’re trying to exorcise was one of the Nine Old Witches!”
“Or she knew them, or….” Lotte shook her head. “Nevermind. That makes the most sense.”

“We need to contact Akko right away!” And with that, Tiffany raised her wand and whispered, “Pharus!” A second later, as an immediately identifiable stream of sparks burst from her wand with an appropriate twinkling noise to mark her position, she wondered why she’d bothered whispering.

It took roughly a minute, but Tiff finally heard the approaching footsteps. Akko hurled herself around the corner, followed longly by Sucy at her usual graceful pace. “Saw the sparks,” Akko said. “What happened?”

“We—” Lotte began.

“We think the ghost is one of the Nine Olde Witches.” Tiffany shoved one of the books at Akko. “The missing names are their names. If we can just narrow it down a little further….”

“Hmm.” Akko took the book. “Well, it’s not Beatrix or Woodward. I’ve met them, they’re nice… usually. So that just leaves seven of them, and I don’t remember their names.”

“You don’t remember their—” Tiffany raised a finger, realized she should probably be more concerned about Akko having met two of the Nine Olde Witches, and gave up. “I know all their names,” she muttered.

“Great! In that case, I have an idea.”

Tiff glanced up and saw the gleam in Akko’s eye. “Please don’t say we’re going to set a trap.”

This was how they’d set their trap.

“I should have held out for a Scooby Snack,” Tiffany grumbled, as she flew aimlessly through the library, the Shooting Star loose in her grasp. She probably would have protested the use of “aimlessly”, however: it was just that her aim was… everywhere and anywhere. They hadn’t been keeping track of the ghost, so it was her job to canvas the whole library and find—

There.

The floating book flapped in front of a bookshelf on the second floor, apparently perusing the spines of its potential victims. Tiffany would have felt a bit angrier about the word theft it was perpetrating, were she not so preoccupied with the embarrassment of what she was about to do.

“Hey!” she yelled.

The book froze. It turned to face her, and shortly thereafter grew its face. The two dots and mouth that rose out of the mist looked less happy than before, but also less murderous, and… well, she couldn’t have that.

“Hey, um, you!” Tiff urged the Shooting Star to lift her up, face to face with the ghost. “Did you know that… you’re a stupid ghost? And no one likes you? I talked to your friends, and they said you were, um….” Wow, it was late. She heaved a yawn, with the words, “Am I doing it right?” mixed in as her eyes closed.

When she opened her eyes, the ghost was glowing red.

“I guess I’m doing it right. Zoinks, etcetera.” She spun the Shooting Star around, the ghost
shrieking its nonexistent head off behind her, and leaned low over the handle. In a tone of the most abject trope-mandated dejection, she muttered, “Like, run for it, Scoob.”

Being the bait stank.

Tiff, if pressed, might have even gone so far as to say it sucked. And it was less because the ghost was rushing after her, hurling books at her head in an attempt to render her unconscious. It wasn’t the near misses either, although the books that whizzed by her head and occasionally clipped her ears didn’t help her mood.

It was the speed. The ghost was fast, sure, but the Shooting Star was really really fast. And the plan didn’t allow her to go really really fast, or the ghost would lose her. So Tiffany sighed, tried to suppress a yawn, and continued down what felt like the slowest aerial chase in history.

Just before a book whanged her in the back of the head.

“Ow!” Tiffany rubbed her skull, looking back over her shoulder at the spectre of death which annoyingly pursued her. “Okay, tough girl. You want to see who’s the better flier?”

They’d both been wanting it—Tiffany and the Shooting Star alike. She leaned forward and cut loose. The next time she looked back, a whole second later, the ghost was nearly out of sight.

Let’s show her what we can really do.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought!” Tiff veered back, taunting the ghost by turning down the speed as she approached—but as soon as books were flung at her, she dove hard and rolled to avoid them. “I bet you’re not even a real ghost, you… hologram perpetrated by a disgruntled real estate mogul!”

The ghost shrieked. Tiffany found it difficult to be frightened at this point. “Got anything else to say?” she yelled, literally flying circles around the ghost as it pursued her. With more time, she’d be flying spheres around the thing.

Up.

She went up, and a book sailed under her.

Back.

Back she dived, looping over the ghost. And on and on, more and more, and Tiffany laughed. It was like she and the broom were connected, like they were one entity —

“Tiff!”

That was Akko, yelling at the top of her lungs. “Tiff, stop doing barrel rolls and stick to the plan!”

“They’re aileron rolls!” Tiff shot back, upside-down over the ghost’s ‘body’.

“Just get over here!”

“Oh, for—all right, fine!” The moment had been ruined already. Still fully in control, but lacking that transcendent feeling of oneness somehow, of communication —Tiffany pulled back on the broom, enough to slow it down. She flew the rest of the way at a relative crawl, staying low to the floor and making the minimal effort to dodge each thrown book. The ghost stayed behind her, its attention solely focused on trying to strike her.

At length, Tiffany reached the bookshelves she was aiming for and rounded the corner, and stopped in
midair. And thus began the second phase of the trap.

“Wait for it,” Akko whispered, perched atop one of the bookshelves, her eyes pinned to the ghost. “Wait for it.”

The ghost rounded the corner and shrieked. Tiffany didn’t move.

“Wait for it.”

The ghost rushed at her.

“Now!”

Lotte and Sucy sprang from their hiding places behind the shelves and yelled, together, “Insidiatori!”

The twin beams of light from their wands met in the center, right where the ghost was. A crystalline lattice of lightning surrounded the ghost. She shrieked again, but her voice was muted behind the buzzing of her cage. The book flew forward, struck the lattice, and rebounded off, sparks flying from the point of impact.

“Good work, team!” Akko hopped down from the shelf, rolling as she landed. When she stood up, she shoved her pointer finger at the ghost like a prosecutor in a video game. “We know you’re one of seven possible people, and we’re gonna keep reading names until you vanish!”

As the shriek returned, Akko rummaged at her belt for a scrap of paper that Tiffany had given her. She held it up and squinted, then declared, “Atikah!”

No response, other than the continued wails of the spirit.

“No? How about…. Scarlette!” Akko waited a few seconds. “No? Um…..” She held the scrap closer to her face. “Tiff, what does this even say? I can’t read your handwriting! Sho… sholast….”

“Scholastica!” Tiff called out. “And you’re reading them out of order!”

“The order doesn’t matter!”

“They’re the Nine Olde Witches, of course it—just let me do it!”

“Akko!” Lotte yelled, barely audible over the ghost’s screams. Her hold on her wand was shaky, as if trying to grip a jackhammer; it jerked and bucked as it kept feeding magic into the ghost’s cage. “This doesn’t feel right! She’s in pain!”

“It’ll be at peace soon!” Akko yelled back, and she held up the paper anew. “Han Lanying? Groa? Tlahuel—”

The ghost’s ‘mouth’ opened so wide that its whole misty form was just black, letting out its loudest shriek yet. All other sound was obliterated. Akko’s grip on the paper was immediately relinquished as her hands went to her ears, pressing hard enough that she seemed to be trying to crush her skull.

Tiffany went to her knees, barely able to see with how her eyes were screwed up. Looking up with all her strength, she saw Sucy hold onto her wand, albeit with her teeth gritted. Lotte, however, collapsed with her hands on her ears and her body in the fetal position. The cage holding the ghost fizzled—faded—vanished.

The bookshelves around them rumbled. They tilted inward, and they fell.
The next thing Tiffany knew, Sucy was dashing toward the middle of them, pulling a vial from her bottomless pocket, smashing it on the ground—

When Tiffany came to—and she *had* to have passed out, because she hadn’t been face-first on the ground earlier—the first thing she noticed was the ringing, of course. Her ears were still shrilling with the echoes of the ghost’s screams.

The second thing she noticed was the smell. Sort of… *damp*, like a bog.

The third thing, as she pushed herself up to a kneel, was the giant mushroom.

“Good thinking, Sucy,” Akko probably said—it was a little hard to tell, what with the ringing, but Tiffany made her best guess. She looked down at the base of the giant mushroom and saw the shattered remains of one of Sucy’s potion vials; then she looked up and saw the mushroom’s huge cap.

She also saw the bookshelves, all leaning upon and supported by the mushroom. If not for Sucy’s quick thinking, they’d have all been crushed. As it was, books were scattered everywhere around them, and some seemed to be covering Lotte and Akko’s legs.

Tiff shook her head, trying to clear out the ringing. It seemed to be working—or maybe the sound was going away on its own. Who knew.

Akko pounded the ground with her fist. “Now who knows where that dumb ghost is? We were so close, too—it’s got to be either Tlahuelpuchi or Lucretia!”

“Girls?” said Lotte.

“You know what? Whatever. We’re going to find that ghost and we’re going to *name* it!” Akko pushed herself to a slightly more upright position, pulled her wand out of her belt, and aimed it at the nearest piece of furniture. “*Bella mediae!*”

The jet of magic struck the shelf with concussive force, sending it flying back. More books fell from the other shelves, and Tiffany cringed as the noise hit her already-pained ears, but they had a clear path out now.

“Girls,” Lotte said again, “something’s wrong.”

Akko looked back. “Oh, of course. You’re covered in books!” She reached for Lotte’s outstretched hand, grabbed it, and started pulling her out from under the mushroom and books.

“No! Not that!” Lotte shoved Akko’s hand away and got to her feet herself. “Something feels really wrong!”

“What *doesn’t* feel wrong about this?” Tiffany declared, shoving herself to her feet. “We’re trying to banish a ghost from a school it probably helped *found*, we’re breaking every noise rule in the library to do it, and—” She glanced back at the giant mushroom, and the piles of books under their fallen bookshelves “—we’re probably doing more damage than the ghost itself, just to try to get rid of it!”

“No, listen to me! I mean—” Lotte sucked in a breath, and her face went blank. “Yes. That’s what I mean.”

Sucy was the last one out from under the mushroom, still holding her borrowed staff. “We getting
“Yes, we’re getting going!” Akko pointed dramatically forward, as if she knew where they were going. “Come on, gang! Only a little longer before we’re done here!”

_Ssh_, said the voice in Lotte’s head.

She would have hyperventilated if she still had full control of her lungs. Suddenly, it was easy to pinpoint _exactly_ what was wrong: the book, pressed into the skin of her back beneath her vest and shirt, where it had slipped in during all the tumult. The voice in her head, and in the rest of her body too, that seemed to be taking control.

_Ssh_, it said. _Let me do it, Lotte._

She tried to make a noise, yell a warning, anything. Her body walked mechanically forward.

_They didn’t listen when you said it before. Why would they listen now?_ The voice sounded bitter. _Your friends leave you behind often, don’t they, Lotte?_

This was the most frightening thing: Lotte wanted to nod—and she didn’t know if she wanted it, or the _ghost_ wanted it for her.

_Doesn’t it make you mad that they don’t listen? That they treat you like dirt? Aren’t you angry?_  

Her eyes were wide, and if her pupils were still obeying her, she knew they would be pinpricks of terror.

_Let’s tell them how we feel._
“So the difference is,” Tiffany said, looking sternly at Akko, “an aileron roll spins the witch around the axis of the broom’s handle. A barrel roll involves rotation on multiple axes, so you do a roll and a loop. Like you’re going around the inside of a barrel. It’s the easiest thing in the world to remember!”

“Okay?” Akko squinted. “Then why is it called an… airelon? Airelon roll?”

“Aileron. Because a plane uses its ailerons to complete the maneuver.”

“But we’re not flying a plane.”

“Unimportant! The point is—”

“Shut up about flying.”

The voice wasn’t Tiffany’s or Akko’s. It wasn’t even Sucy’s. Tiffany and Akko turned, slowly and together, to look back at Lotte. “Um.” Akko frowned. “Are you all right?”

“Oh, acting like you care now.” Lotte stood stock-still, looking down at the floor. The moonlight on her glasses obscured her eyes. “I see how it is.”

Sucy stepped toward her. “Lotte—”

“I didn’t want to come here.”

For several seconds, at long last, there was true silence in the library. Even so, Lotte’s words—it wasn’t so much what she was saying as much as the simple hurt in how she was saying them—echoed in Tiffany’s head, and she had no doubt they were echoing in Akko and Sucy’s heads too.

“I didn’t agree to come in the first place. You did, Akko, and you two dragged me along like you always do. You didn’t even ask me.” Her hands were twitching, as if being used by someone who didn’t know how to use them. “You didn’t even think about it.”

She looked up, although her eyes were still obscured by her glasses. “It’s always about what you want! You’re always dragging me places I don’t want to be!”

Sucy’s eyes were narrow. “Lotte. Quit it. This isn’t like you.”

“Hah!” Lotte’s bark of a laugh couldn’t possibly have held less humor. “Is that how it is? You get to be a jerk for a year and no one gets to say anything about it, but the moment the nice girl decides to speak up—”

Sucy was shrinking back. Akko stepped forward now. “Lay off her, Lotte. I know you’re upset, but Sucy’s been dealing with a lot, and—”

“And it gives her an excuse to treat everyone around her like garbage.” Lotte was grinning now, and her teeth seemed to catch the light as well as her glasses, giving her an eerie glow. Like a jack-o-lantern with a white flame inside. “Why are you defending her, Akko? Do you know how many poisons she’s shoved down your throat?”
“Stop it!” Akko flung her hands out, palms open. “What’s gotten into you, Lotte? What’s going on?”

“What’s gotten into me?” This time, when Lotte laughed, it was high pitched, frightening, and it sounded like she was having the time of her life. “Maybe I’m tired of you too, Akko. Did you ever notice, while you were acting like the leader of our troupe, how much time I spent trying to keep you out of trouble? God, I feel like I need to buy you a leash!”

She’d figured out what to do with her hands, at last. They were balled into tight fists. “You’re horrible! You’re both horrible and I don’t know why I hang around you!”

Akko stood in slack-jawed astonishment. Sucy didn’t look any more in control.

“H-hey,” Tiff said. She stepped forward slowly. “This isn’t right. You three are supposed to be friends. You’re supposed to always win and always be friends and… not change. Come on, say… say jinkies or something.”

Lotte fixed her gaze on Tiff, and Tiff gasped. “Jinkies? You really think you know people, Tiffany Vandergard? You don’t know the first thing about anyone, and that’s why Alice ditched you.”

Tiff staggered as if she’d been bludgeoned in the stomach. But Lotte’s eyes—she’d angled them differently, to look at Tiff, and they were glowing. It wasn’t just some trick of the light: they were glowing electric blue.

Thank goodness she wasn’t the only one who noticed. “Lotte,” Akko said. “Your eyes. You—what have you done with Lotte?”

“And you finally get it.” Lotte—no, not Lotte—the ghost laughed, raising Lotte’s arms to the side like a preacher’s. “You would have figured it out five minutes ago if you’d listened to her. But you know what I’ve learned from being stuck in this library for a thousand years?”

She let her hands rise, fingers clutching at the air, and red energy flowed from them. All around the group, the bookshelves—not just the books, the shelves—creaked, groaned, and rose into the air. So did Lotte’s body, arms still wide as if crucified, glowing arcane. The echoes of her voice filled the cavernous library. “No one ever listens.”

“Is that what you think?” Akko’s mouth wasn’t in its devastated, half-open gawp anymore: she wore a fierce scowl. “Well, listen to this! Tlahuel—”

The ghost pointed Lotte’s fingers at her. Books flew off the shelves at Akko like bullets from a gatling gun. She yelped midword, ducking flat to the ground to avoid them. Sucy dodged to the side, but Tiffany wasn’t so lucky; a few books caught her in the stomach and she went down hard.

“Tlahuel—”

Lotte’s body had floated above the shelves. She grinned malevolently, then clapped her hands together. The bookshelves on either side mimicked the motion, slamming inward with a horrid crash of wood.

The next thing Tiff saw, she was on the Shooting Star, looking down at the wreckage of the shelves—it must have slipped under her and carried her up. Looking down, she saw that Sucy had done some sort of backflip and gotten on top of the shelves. But… “Akko!” Tiff gasped, with the little air her lungs had to offer.

“Okay, you know what?”
The squeaky voice came from within the shattered shelves. A second later, a furious-looking mouse—sharing Akko’s hairstyle—scampered out from one of the shattered cubbies and crawled up to the top. “You’re making this way harder than it has to be!” she yelled, pointing up at Lotte’s floating body. “Tlahuelpuchi!”

A moment of stillness.

Lotte’s mouth opened, and what came forth were cackles.

“Okay, that’s not it!” There was a poof of smoke, and Akko was standing atop the ruined shelves again, Sucy by her side. “Er, what was the last one again?”

“Lu….,” Tiff wheezed.

“Akko,” Sucy said, quietly.

“What?”

Sucy pointed to the side, behind Lotte’s floating body. Akko looked and said, “Oh.”

The air was filled with books. They formed a sort of floating wall behind Lotte’s body, spines pointed at the three of them, filling an entire cross-section of the library. Lotte’s face was set in a snarl, and the ghost heaved breaths and growls. “Let’s see you leave me behind NOW!”

She flung her hands forward. With a wave of red energy, the books flew at them.

“Stop!” Tiff said, as loudly as she could.

The books were nearly here. Akko readied her wand, Sucy her staff.

“Stop!” Tiff yelled, and heaved a breath. “Lucretia!”

The books—
—froze.

Lotte’s jaw was slack. All around her, the books fell like rain, providing the same sort of ambient noise. Her arms slowly fell to her sides. “Lucretia?” she whispered.

Akko’s eyes were wide. “You got her!” she yelled, pumping her fist.

“Lucretia?” she said, somewhat louder. A lot angrier. The white noise of books hitting the floor faded, replaced with a different rumbling. One by one, around her, the shelves were levitating off the ground.

“You—you didn’t get her?” Akko’s eyes were wide as she stared up at Tiff. “There’s no one left! That’s all of them! Who is she?”

“LUCRETIA!”

The bookshelves flew at them, and this time, they weren’t freezing for anything.

Akko drew her wand and plunged it toward the ground like the sword into the stone, with a cry of, “Aegis maxima!” A crystalline barrier of energy sprung up before her and Sucy, and just in time. Bookshelf after bookshelf shattered against it—but Tiffany could see it was wavering.
At least she was pretty sure it was wavering. She had her own problems; a sizeable contingent of the shelves were flying at her level. She weaved hard to the left, dodging a row of them, then zoomed low under another set until she was right in front of Lotte. “Snap out of it!” she yelled—then she hauled back and punched Lotte in the face.

The ghost creaked Lotte’s head back toward her, and her eyes blazed crimson anew. “You,” she hissed. One of her upraised hands clenched into a fist.

Tiff heard a sort of swishing from her left, and looked that way with dread in her stomach. One of the shattered shelves was rising, piece by broken piece—nails, splinters of wood, screws, and more. Then they flew at her like a storm of flechettes.

Tiff gasped and dove low, but they were following her. She put all her energy into evading them: soaring toward the ceiling, corkscrewing, diving straight down—

And got slammed in the side by a shelf.

She saw nothing but stars, but felt her body tumbling down into a harsh landing, flat on her stomach. She could hardly breathe—and then a load of lumber fell upon her. She’d have cried out in pain if she had the air, and the taste of blood was so strong in her mouth she felt ready to choke on it.

As her vision returned, Tiff saw Akko and Sucy between the white spots on her eyes. Akko’s shield was failing, and Sucy tensed, ready for action—but it was no help. A length of wood shattered the shield and struck Akko in the face, knocking her down. Sucy tried to parry with her staff, but another shelf came at her, knocking it from her hands. It sailed through the air, transforming back into the cane it had been.

As Sucy glanced after it, another piece of wood struck her in the stomach, sending her sprawling atop Akko.

Tiff felt the Shooting Star squirming beneath her, but then the wood on her back seemed to get heavier, and she let out a rattle of pain. It hurt so bad.

“Stay down.” Lotte’s voice rang out coldly through the library, so unlike how kind she’d been before. She floated down toward Tiffany, her hand in an open, clenched position before her, as if she were drowning something beneath an invisible lake. “Now, my new friend,” she said, touching down and kneeling at Tiff’s side, smiling obscenely, “what should we—”

A creaking sound filled the room. The sound of a door opening.

Lotte whirled around. Tiff craned her neck as best as she could. It wasn’t enough: she saw a beam of light lancing out across the floor, but not the door it was coming from. Then she heard the slow footsteps, interspersed with the steady tap of a cane, or a staff. By and by, a shadow hobbled into the light.

“Who?” Lotte yelled.

“Me,” said the voice.

Old. Almost senile. Tiffany was already gasping, but now she made room for one more: was that Professor Lukič?

The tapping came closer, at exactly the rate Tiff would expect for an arthritic old woman. “I wondered if it really was you,” she said, “all these years. I don’t ask you to forgive me for my
cowardice in never coming to check. But doing what you did to these poor girls, my dear? That is *not* acceptable.”

Lotte’s body stepped forward, less like a person and more like a puppet being dragged suddenly. “Who *are you* to tell me what’s acceptable? Who are you *at all*?”

Lukić laughed in her eerie old cackle. “Who better to discipline a tantruming child?” She was just barely in Tiff’s view now, and spread one arm wide, the other still upon her staff. “You mean to say you don’t recognize me, daughter dear?”

*Daughter?* Tiff stared. This ghost, whoever she was, had been in the library for over a *thousand* years.

Lotte’s hand thrust forward. “You’re not her,” she seethed. “You’re not Lucretia!” The hand glowed red, and a new hail of books flung themselves at Lukić.

Lukić tapped her staff on the floor. The books fell harmlessly to the ground.

The ghost growled, threw more and more at Lukić as she approached, but with each tap, the ghost’s ammunition left its control. More than that, with each tap, the destroyed books and shelves around the professor reassembled themselves, slotted themselves back into their compartments.

All the while, Tiff’s jaw was slack.

*You think I’m just some doddering old witch, don’t you... You’re more right than you know.*

*Tap*, went her staff. She was closing in.

*Well, it’s not Beatrix or Woodward. I’ve met them, they’re nice... usually.*

*Tap*, went her staff.

“Stop it!” the ghost shrieked, as Lukić stepped past Akko and Sucy’s unconscious bodies, toward Lotte’s. She raised her arm, and Lotte’s body flinched away—

Lucretia held her in a one armed hug, and Lotte’s body went rigid.

No one spoke for several seconds, and all Tiff could hear was her own labored breathing. Then, finally, Lotte’s mouth moved. “Don’t act like you care now. Not sixteen hundred years later.” The voice was hard, but it was the kind of hard that was holding back tears.

“I always cared.”

“You never *acted* like it!” The ghost shoved her way out of Lucretia’s grasp. “Do you remember what your idea of *caring* was? You shoved me in this library to study, day in and day out, while you and your other eight ‘Olde Witches’ went off and *did* things!”

“I know,” Lucretia said.

“I *died* in here.” No more holding the tears back now. Lotte’s hand reached behind her back and retrieved the book. It glowed with her energy. “I remember now. I was reading this book. I was trying to do a spell that might just *impress* you. That might make you *acknowledge* I exist!”

“*I know,?”* Lucretia said.

“I *died* in here.” No more holding the tears back now. Lotte’s hand reached behind her back and retrieved the book. It glowed with her energy. “I remember now. I was reading this book. I was trying to do a spell that might just *impress* you. That might make you *acknowledge* I exist!”

She flung her arms wide, the book returning to her back. “And now I can barely remember *I exist!*” Her teeth were gritted, and Tiff saw the tears welling in her eyes. “I’ve seen the books in here about you. They don’t even mention me. They don’t mention you even *had* a daughter!”
“I know.”

“Don’t say that!” Lotte stamped her foot. “If you know, then why?”

“Because I’m not in those books either.”

Lucretia slowly unclenched her right hand, and her staff fell. “Because the Lucretia in those books is a good woman, and I’m not in them.” She sighed. “Because the thought that the ghost in this library might be you… it hurt too much to think about. And I was selfish enough that that was reason enough, for over a thousand years, and I can’t ever make that up to you.”

She stepped forward and embraced Lotte—the ghost—in a hug, and this time the ghost let her. “I’m sorry I made you hate me,” Lucretia whispered, “but I can let you go now. My little girl. My beautiful Marya.”

The final word—the final name—had been spoken quietly, yet it echoed like a gunshot. Lotte gasped. Then her face broke out into a tearful smile, and the ghost wrapped her arms around her mother. “I never hated you, Mama,” she whispered, as motes of blue floated from her like snowfall in reverse. “It was always… her.”

She shook. Then the final motes of blue rose from her and ascended, through the ceiling, to where she knew where. Lotte’s body went limp, and she sagged in Lucretia’s grasp. The book slid from her hand and landed on the floor, harmlessly.

Lucretia let out a long breath. Then she stooped, still supporting Lotte on her shoulder. She picked up the book and her staff, and tapped the latter against the ground once more. A wave of green energy spread throughout the library. Tiff felt the shelves lifting off her body, and looked up to see them reassembling themselves. With all the extra room her lungs had all of a sudden, she heaved huge breaths.

Akko groaned from where she lay upon the ground. Lucretia turned around, not toward her, but to Tiff. She fixed one bulging eye on Tiff and raised her index finger to her mouth.

The gesture was unmistakable. Tiff gulped, and shut up.

Akko groaned. Her back, and her everything else, felt like she’d just gotten a building dropped on her, and judging by what she remembered from before being knocked cold, that wasn’t far off.

Wand. Check. It wasn’t on her belt but it was on the ground in front of her, so she scrabbled her hand forward until it was in her fingers.

Sucy. Check. Sucy was groaning her way back to life on Akko’s left. “Not worth it,” she mumbled, fumbling in her robes for some sort of potion. "So not worth the detention slips."

Lotte. Akko shook herself. Lotte! She shoved herself to her unsteady feet, the adrenaline spike strong enough that she didn’t wince from the pain. “Lotte!” she yelled.

She was there, still mostly unconscious but apparently okay, her body being held by… “Professor Lukić?” Akko frowned. “What are you doing here?”

Lukić cackled, supporting Lotte with one arm, the other arm holding the staff that supported her. It seemed a bit precarious. “Just a little janitorial work. I came to help, but you’d had all the fun!”

“So the ghost is gone? And when you say ’a little’….” Akko glanced around. The last she’d seen,
the library had been absolutely destroyed. Like, ‘we’re giving you a detention voucher and also an expulsion notice for ruining our library’, kind of destroyed. Now, the moonlight shone on shelves in neat rows, their books neatly stacked, as if she’d just arrived. “How in—how did you—I was out for a minute! No way did you fix it all that fast!”

“Were you?” Lukić cackled. “In fact you were unconscious out for some time, my dear problem child. It’s good to see you up.”

“Wait, how long was I—”

Lotte made a little murmur. Akko switched gears mid-word. “Lotte!” she yelled, tripping over her tongue as she rushed forward. As Lotte slumped forward, Akko grabbed her out of Lukić’s arms. “Lotte, speak to me!”

Lotte groaned with obvious discomfort. There was a shiner of a bruise on Lotte’s cheek, and Akko wasn’t sure where it had come from. Behind her, she noticed Sucy rushing up, holding a vial. She reached forward gently, and let a drop fall on the bruise. Lotte let out a grunt of pain, flinching as it made contact.

The bruise let out some smoke, sizzled, and then lost some of its definition, as though it had spent two weeks healing. Sucy pulled back, staring with the quiet intensity that told Akko she was worried.

Finally, Lotte’s eyes blinked open. They weren’t glowing, and they weren’t red. They were just Lotte’s regular old eyes. “Wow,” she whispered, “that smells really bad, Sucy.”

By the time Akko realized she’d gone and hugged Lotte, her arms were already around Lotte’s body and her face was in her friend’s shoulder. A weight on her left side told her that Sucy had joined in too. “Please don’t get possessed again,” she said, fervently.

“Okay,” Lotte said. A few seconds passed. “Wait,” Lotte said, “I was possessed? You’re saying I was—”

“You didn’t know you were possessed?” Akko broke from the hug, holding Lotte’s shoulders at arms’ length.

“I just….” Lotte gritted her teeth and rubbed her temple, as if trying to knead the headache away. “The ghost shrieked, everything collapsed on us, we were under Sucy’s mushroom and I was saying something felt wrong, and…. It’s not very clear after that.” She stared at Akko, eyes wide. “You’re saying that ghost possessed me?”

“And she would have gotten away with it too,” Lukić said, laughing with herself, “if it weren’t for you meddling kids.”

“So the ghost is gone? It really was Lucretia?” Akko found herself squinting as she looked up at Lukić. Somehow the story didn’t seem right.

“Yes!”

The four of them—Akko, Sucy, Lotte, and Lukić—looked over to where Tiff was standing. In the tumult, her presence had completely slipped Akko’s mind. “Yes,” she repeated, quite loudly, like a kid in a play trying to make sure her parents heard her lines. “You said her name and she disappeared, and that’s exactly what happened!”

“It kind of didn’t go away,” Sucy said, her lidded stare fixed on Tiff. “It kind of threw a library at
“Those were just its death throes!” Tiff frowned. “Undeath throes? Redeath throes? Er, those were just its throes.”

“Hm.” Akko frowned, then shrugged. “Well, you were there!” However, her frown deepened. “You know, I was gonna forgive that ghost for being so mean and everything, and then it went and possessed you and tried to kill us! I thought the Nine Olde Witches were, you know, nice, but Lucretia’s just the worst!”

Tiff squinted her eyes, and the rest of her face too. It looked really uncomfortable. “I mean….”

“Yes,” Professor Lukić said, letting out a short bark of a laugh. “Lucretia was absolutely deplorable. But now you’re done, and I have these for you!” She reached into her robes and pulled out three impressive-looking pieces of paper.

“The detention vouchers!” Akko said, snatching hers.

“Not worth it,” Sucy muttered, grabbing hers.

Lotte took her voucher without comment.

“And now, if you’ll excuse me,” Lukić said, smiling in that wicked way of hers, “I need to talk to this small child for a… debriefing session.” She tilted her head toward Tiffany, who stared at her expectantly, almost obsequiously. “Your work is finished. Go, go!”

“Don’t need to say it twice,” Sucy said. She turned around and made for the door. Akko was quick to come up to her side, while Lotte followed behind, clutching her hands and looking vaguely uncomfortable. Like always.

They always won, and they were always friends, and nothing ever changed.

As they made it through the door, Sucy held up her detention voucher. “Hey,” she said, “night’s still young and I’m still mad. Let’s go blow this on something.” She shook it a few times.

But Akko held up her hand. “Wait.” She turned to Lotte. “Lotte, you said it ‘wasn’t very clear’ after the Lucretia possessed you. You didn’t say that you couldn’t remember anything.”

All of a sudden, Lotte seemed like she wanted to stare anywhere but at Akko’s face. She looked less vaguely uncomfortable now, more specifically uncomfortable. “Um,” she said, and sucked in breath. “A… little.”

“Do you remember calling us terrible friends?”

Lotte looked down at her shoes.

“Is that how you feel?”

“No! It’s not….” Another deep breath. “Sometimes,” she said, looking up at last, her lips trembling, “you two can be a bit… much. And I’m not that. I’m not… much. I don’t know how to say no sometimes, when you’re like that.” She looked down at the floor again, as if awaiting judgment.

Akko looked at her. Then, she looked at Sucy. Then Sucy blinked, and then Sucy nodded. “Lotte,” she said, “Akko and I are going to go do something stupid and blow our vouchers. Want in?”
“I…” Lotte looked at them, and Akko hoped she was making her own eyes encouraging enough. “No,” she said, finally. Then she said it again, stronger: “No! I want to go back to bed and read a book.”

Akko leaned in and hugged her again. Why not? She was a hugger. “Of course,” she said. “You’re always much to me.” She heard Lotte chuckle by her head.

Then she let go and grabbed Sucy by the hand. “Come on,” she said, “let’s go tick off Professor Finnelan!”

Off they ran. Akko glanced back to see Lotte waving at them, shaking her head a bit.

“You said they were out for some time,” Tiff said, following Professor Lucretia up to her office.

“And they were out for some time,” Lucretia replied, chuckling under her breath. “The time in question was sixty seconds or so, in fact.”

It was incredible. In the dead of night, with Luna Nova’s corridors empty and no one here to witness her, Lucretia was a different person. Though she still walked with a staff for balance, she was far faster and more surefooted than she acted in public. Though she still laughed with unnerving regularity, she didn’t spend fifty words at a time to say nothing at all. Did no one else know about this?

In far less time than Tiffany would have expected, they had arrived at the office of Professor Lukić—at least, that was the engraving upon the door. With a tap of Lucretia’s staff, the door creaked open to reveal a room filled with bubbling potions, taxidermied animals suspended in bottles, and a trio of bats hanging from perches. They squeaked happily as Lucretia entered, and she reached within her robe to pull out fruit for them to munch on.

Lucretia took a book—the book her daughter had possessed—from her cloak and placed it on the desk. Then she sat in the room’s chair. Its only chair: Tiff stayed standing, holding the Star in one hand. “Well,” Lucretia said, tapping her staff on the floor again: the door closed shut. “I can see the steam leaving your ears, reddened child, from all the questions burning inside you. Ask.”

The first one left Tiff’s mouth before she could think to stop herself. “How are you immortal?”

“Well.” Lucretia tapped her chin. “Am I immortal? I can’t say for sure. Might just be very long lived. Never felt like testing it empirically, to be honest.” She laughed, then coughed, and grabbed a bottle of clear liquid from her desk—hopefully water—and drank it for a few seconds. “Better,” she said. “Now as for why I’m still around… good food, clean living, and I think a potion accident when I was ninety that I’ve never been able to replicate.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“Not a living soul.” Lucretia smirked. “Not sure how long that’ll last with all this fancy photography these days. But as far as anyone knows, old Lukić has been doddering around forever, and that’s as far as anyone looks into it. Keep it that way, won’t you?”

“What were they like?”

When Lucretia motioned with her hand for clarification, Tiff kept blurring. “The other Olde Witches! What were they like?”

“I don’t know.”
“But—” How can you not know? Tiff wanted to say, but Lucretia held up her finger and stared off into the middle distance.

After a few seconds, she answered. “This brain of mine isn’t really made for my sort of lifespan. I don’t remember everything I wish I did. That act of mine, that senile old witch I play at, it’s not as much of a lie as I wish. But… if they’re like me… then they were terrible.”

“You—” Tiff gesticulated with her free hand. “You just said you don’t know! How can you call them terrible?”

Lucretia looked at her. Looked through her, with rheumatic old eyes that seemed more incisive than finely tuned scientific instruments. “You seem like you’re trying to make yourself a great witch,” she said.

Tiff didn’t need to reply. “In that case,” Lucretia said, “remember something, won’t you, child? There’s many difficult things in this world for a young witch. None of them is as difficult as becoming a great witch, a truly great witch, and remaining a good one. Think about it, won’t you?”

Tiff frowned. Before she could try to process the words, Lucretia clapped her hands. “Well, enough of that. It’s time for my question now. Just one, don’t worry.” She leaned forward in her chair. “The point of any detention is to make sure the pupil learns something. So, what did you learn from tonight’s detention?”

“Um….” Tiff felt as though she’d been caught with her weight on her heels. “I learned that… sometimes… you can be mean to your friends… without realizing you’re doing it? And that… they might be angry about it without telling you?” She looked down at the floor. “Is that why Alice is —”

Lucretia let out a long, shrill laugh. “Not even close! Try again!”

Tiff glanced up, eyes narrow. “How about, Scooby Doo is a dumb show and you shouldn’t watch it?”

“Scooby Doo is an excellent show, you young fool,” Lucretia said, cackling. “Last try?”

“Don’t abandon your children in a library for a thousand years?” Tiff clapped her hands over her mouth as soon as she’d said it, which was about five seconds later than she should have.

Lucretia glared up at her. “Well, you’ve got a mouth on you, don’t you?” She clicked her tongue. Before Tiff could apologize, though, Lucretia was speaking again. “But you’re not wrong. Thankfully you’ve got a brain on you as well. You’re not unintelligent. I’m sure you’ll figure it out soon.”

She tapped her staff on the floor, and Tiff heard the door creaking behind her. “I’m done with you. Your detention is complete. Go and get some rest.” She winked. “Try not to obsess over some batty old crone’s riddle, will you?”

“Ugh,” Tiff groaned the next day, having barely slept all night due to obsessing over some batty old crone’s riddle. Maybe four hours of sleep, at the most. Thank goodness it was Sunday, at least, but… what was that irregular beeping?

With laborious effort, she rolled over on her side and craned her neck down to look at the source. “Char,” she muttered, “what….”
Char glanced her way. “Oh, you’re up. Bright and early.” Then she returned to looking at her phone—a phone which, Tiff saw as she squinted, told her the time was just after noon.

“What are you doing?” Tiff said.

“Alarms.” Char held her phone up for Tiff to take. “See?”

Tiff yawned wide, and when she was done she tried to focus on the screen she was holding. The first alarm was an hour and a half before their first class. Subsequent alarms followed at ten minute intervals. “Seriously?”

“I’ll have headphones in, you won’t hear a thing.” The creaking and shifting of weight from below told Tiff that Char was getting off her mattress and standing up, and Tiff looked up to see Char holding her hand out. Tiff returned her phone. “It’s just… I kinda screwed you over. Got you in detention because I couldn’t get out of bed. And, to do that to my mate, that seems pretty shitty. So this is me, trying to make it up to you.”

Tiff winced at the curse, but smiled anyway. “You’re really putting in the effort, aren’t you.” She swung her legs out toward the ladder. “You know, Char, you can be a pretty good friend.”

“Stop, you’ll make me blush.” Char pointed a thumb over her shoulder. “Also, Mani’s been waiting for you to get up and she brought breakfast. Better call her a good friend too.”

Tiff looked past Char to see that yes, Mani was resting on her bed next to a plate of scones and packets of butter. “I wasn’t sure how many you wanted,” she said, sitting more upright, “so I got a bunch for—ow!” she yelped, clonking her head on the Shooting Star as she rose. It hovered over her bed, pointed toward the window like the previous night, but bathed in sunlight this time.

“Thanks!” Tiff smiled. “And yes, you are also a good friend, Mani.”

Mani smiled back, a little shyly. “Let me get you one,” she said, and picked up her wand from her bedside table.

Tiff had enough presence of mind to flatten herself against her mattress, just before Mani’s levitation spell blasted the scone at her. It smashed against the wall behind her and burst in a shower of crumbs. “Sorry!” Mani yelped. “I swear I could do that yesterday!”

Tiff smirked. Then she chuckled, even snorted. She couldn’t help it. How could she have possibly felt alone in the library, the previous night?

“Here,” Char said, grabbing a second scone and tossing it up, an easy grab for Tiff. “For what it’s worth, she did manage it yesterday. No lies.”

“Yeah!” Mani growled, then rolled over and fumbled on her bedside table for her anti-magic device. “I bet getting bruised on the head from your broom probably messed me up,” she said, firing a few spells into the device.

“Totally.” Char stuck both hands behind her head and leaned against the wall. “Hey, you still don’t know what’s up with that thing, right? And why did Professor Lukić want you to bring it along on the detention, anyway?”

Tiffany gulped down a bite of her scone, then cleared her throat. “I’m afraid I’m no closer to understanding the Shooting Star, and I don’t know why Professor Lu—”

She choked on her scone.
“Mate?” Char leaned toward her. “Did some scone go down the wrong way?”

“Oh my goodness,” Tiff said, sputtering as she coughed up the bit of pastry. “Oh my actual, genuine goodness.” In her peripheral vision, she saw the rest of the scone slipping from her fingers, and Char and Mani exchanging confused glances, but she barely had the brainpower necessary to notice. She’d spent all night obsessing over the question, and as soon as she’d taken her mind off it for a minute, the answer was—

“That’s it,” she murmured. “It’s really that stupidly simple. That’s all she was trying to show me.”

“Mate?” Char said, just as Tiff hurled herself over the edge of the bed and down the ladder, almost falling flat on her face in the process. “Whoa! What’s happening, can we get some explanation here?”

“No time!” Tiff grabbed a simple robe and yanked it over her head, not taking the time to smooth out any wrinkles. She snatched the Star from the air, yanked the door open, and hopped on her broom. “I’ll explain everything later, but this is—this is huge and I can’t believe no one’s ever figured this out! Later!”

“Tiff!” Mani called out, but Tiff was gone—zooming down the hall, all thoughts of no-flying-in-the-corridor rules vanished from her mind. That mind was focused on a very specific destination: the second year dorms.

She metaphorically screeched to a literal halt half a minute later, stopping in front of the open door she needed. “Lotte Jansson!” she yelled. “I need to talk to you right now!”

Lotte looked down from her top bunk, peering over the top of her book. Akko and Sucy also looked up, and Akko waved a floppy hello. The two of them looked as happy as clams—if the clams in question were covered in welts, dripping with bright orange slime, and apparently lacking any bones other than their skulls. Tiff lost her train of thought for a moment, there. “Er?”

“Detention vouchers,” Lotte said, as though that explained anything. “The effects should wear off by tomorrow, apparently. I can’t believe this is what you two blew them on.”

“Worth it,” Sucy mumbled.

Lotte shook her head with a little smile, then refocused on Tiff. “Sorry, you said you wanted to talk to me?”

“Right! Needed to!” Tiff got off the Star, planted her feet, and held it out. “Please come down!”

Lotte did. “What’s the problem?”

“Not a problem! Just…” Tiff let herself inside the room and shut the door. “You can talk to ghosts, right?”

Lotte nodded.

“Ghosts who can fly around and have a mind of their own?”

“Yes, that’s what ghosts are….”

“Ghosts who can possess objects,” Tiff said, “and make them fly around, and make them look like they have minds of their own.” She shoved the Shooting Star forward.
All four of them stared at it. Lotte was the first to speak, a full ten seconds later. “Oh. I... I never thought of that before.” She grimaced, sort of scrunching her body inward as she considered it. “I don’t know if it would....”

“Please! At least try it!” Tiff stepped forward, shoving the broom further forward.

“Okay.” Lotte took a deep breath, closed her eyes, steadied herself. She opened them, and sang again. It was the song from last night, but it wasn’t resonant like it had been in the library. Just one girl, singing one little questioning song.

After about twenty seconds, Tiff began to feel a little silly. “Is it working?” Akko said, doing her best to crane her neck forward. “I kind of expected something to—”

She stood upon the windswept tor. This was the time and place, correct? The meeting place she’d heard about.

A gusting wind picked up, much stronger than before. She fought to keep her footing, arms flailing about, and almost dropped her broom—that wouldn’t do; she was trying to impress! To make a statement!

“There she is!” cried a voice.

The witch looked up to see two new witches gliding down on ordinary brooms—nothing like hers. “I’m very sorry we’re late!” yelled one, whose hair was braided with flowers. “The leyline was unstable on the way here, and—you are very red,” she said, interrupting herself as she alighted upon the ground.

And you are very green, the witch decided not to say. Neither accusation was exactly incorrect: the witch’s clothes, wand, hair, even broom were all red, whereas the flower-braided young woman was robed entirely in emerald. Together, they looked like Christmas.

“And that, Woodward, is why we leave early,” the other newcomer said in a lecturing voice. Her hair was unbraided, flowing, and composed of blonde and pale green locks. “Now, I believe we know why we’re all here,” she said, turning her attention on the witch. “Make your case.”

The witch fought down the urge to gulp, and straightened up her back instead. “I’m from across the sea. I’ve spent my childhood learning all I could of enchantments, curses, all the witchcraft that I could. It’s not enough. I’ve exhausted my resources in my homeland. But there are whispers.”

“A cabal of witches on a faraway island, forming a sisterhood of learning. Open only to the select few. I assure you, there is no witch more select than me.”

They just kept... staring at her. No positive reaction, not even a negative one. The witch felt herself wilt. “Please,” she said. “Magic exists to help people, but I can't do that with what I know now. I need your guidance.”

At long last, Woodward smiled. The witch suppressed a sigh of relief. “So,” Woodward said. “How do you plan to convince us that you’re a good fit for the New Moon Society, new friend?”

Beside her, the blonde-and-green witch rolled her eyes. “Beatrix,” Woodward said out of the side of her mouth, “we’ve been over this a hundred times. We do not need to use the Latin name; it just sounds pretentious.”

“Latin is the language of learning. And it sounds better, besides.”
“Why do you think *Luna Nova* sounds better?”

The witch held up a finger before Beatrix and Woodward could continue their argument. “Firstly,” she said. “I would much rather be inducted into a society with the name *Luna Nova*. And secondly,” she continued, before Woodward could get out a word of retort, “this is my case.”

She held out her broom—if she could call it that, but the truth was that naming it so seemed an insult. “This is my finest work of magic,” she said. “*My Shooting Star*. Name a destination, and I can fly to it faster than any other witch on any other broom—though she be given a head start of ten leagues.”

Beatrix looked at her coolly. “Confidence,” she said. “Good.”

“Don’t worry,” Woodward said, holding a hand to her mouth as if in a play. “She’s quite affectionate once you get to know her.”

Beatrix snorted. “In any case. This tor,” she said, jabbing her broom at the hill beneath them, “is at one end of a leyline. At the other end is the site of our society. If you are the witch you claim, it will be no trouble to arrive at that destination—before we do. And since I’m in a sporting mood today….”

She smirked and threw a leg over her broom. “I won’t be accepting any sort of head start.”

The witch snorted too, mounting her Shooting Star. “That’s your loss.” She felt the energy building beneath her, as if standing upon a volcano. She and the broom were united in wanting to go, to win, to learn.

“All right, I’ll count us off!” said Woodward, mounting her broom as well. “Oh, and before I forget, I don’t believe we asked your name?”

The witch smiled. “My name is Scarlette. And it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“—happen already,” Akko said, and then her jaw dropped.

Tiff heaved a breath like a deep diver breaching the water. That memory… it had been so real, as if plucked straight out of someone else’s head. And then she saw the face. The head it had been plucked from.

A face, outlined in red and floating above the middle of the Shooting Star. Female, but that was about as far as Tiff could figure out—it was too indistinct to see if she was young or old. Her mouth was moving, and Tiff heard the voice she’d heard in her dreams the previous night.

“Help me. Please… Tiffany. You… save everyone. Find… find me. Find the rest of me. Please.”

Tiff’s stare was fixed upon her. She hardly breathed.

“Help me,” the face said. “Find me.”

“That’s… that’s the Fourth Olde Witch,” Tiff said. “That’s Scarlette!”

Chapter End Notes
Before I forget: I want to thank hecallsmehischild, without whose constant encouragement and pre reading help this story wouldn't be nearly what it is today.
Elizabeth was certain that she was about to die.

Unfortunately, the thing was—and somehow this part was more frustrating than being about to die—the thing was that Elizabeth didn’t know how she knew. It was like… like how gravity went down, and fire was hot, and her older sister was annoying. She just knew it as a fact of the universe, even if she didn’t have the words to say why.

This made convincing Mum and Janine a real pain in the bum.

“Well,” Mum said, holding her hand to Lizzie’s head as she sprawled in bed, “you don’t feel feverish. Or clammy, or even sweaty.”

“Because she’s not sick,” Janine groaned. “She’s faking it. To get out of school. Again.”

“Ugh,” Lizzie managed. Talking was difficult enough; she definitely couldn’t muster the will to get out of bed, no matter what they said. “Mummmm, I’m not faking it. I feel like I’m about to die.”

“When I was your age,” Janine said, leaning over her bed, “I once got sick really bad. I thought I was going to die too. It lasted about three days. Even if you feel like that, and I’m not saying I think you do, it doesn’t mean—”

“Janiiiiiiine.” Lizzie put all her strength into that ‘Janine’, and it worked: something clinked somewhere, and Janine shut up.

For about five seconds. “In any case,” she said, as Lizzie closed her eyes in defeat. “I hope you understand what all these absences are doing to your education. Do you think I would have gotten my career if I’d skipped classes every day I could? Are you with me so far?”

Mum laughed, but not in an agreeing way. “Janine, dear, you don’t have to act like her mother. I’m already right here.”

“I’m just saying—”

“And we’re listening.” Mum laughed again, which incidentally proved that Janine couldn’t ever successfully act like her. Janine wasn’t the laughing type. “Don’t you have your big important career to get to?”

Janine sighed like she was the one dying. “Right you are, Mother.”

The sound of fabric on hair told Lizzie that Janine was putting on that stupid hat, and it was quickly followed by footsteps. Janine, mercifully, was leaving the room. But then another set of footsteps: Mum was leaving too. “Mummm?” she managed.

“I’ll be right back,” Mum said, patting her head before she walked away—at least, her voice was getting further away: Lizzie wasn’t opening her eyes. “And you don’t have to go to school today, don’t worry.” Lizzie could hear Janine rolling her eyes at that. Apparently the sound of rolling eyes sounded like a scoff.

She groaned as the two of them descended the stairs, and managed to open her eyes again. She wasn’t sure why she bothered: all she got to look at was her stupid bedroom that she had to share
with Janine, and with all of Janine’s stupid awards. Like the karate trophy, on the dresser on the opposite wall. God, what a tacky plastic piece of junk it was.

A blank room, a row of ugly trophies, and this feeling of frustrating, inexplicable dread. That was all she had. Lizzie growled, clenched her fist, and—the trophy rattled.

She blinked, and then she heard voices: Mum and Janine downstairs. “Have a lovely day out there,” Mum said.

And then Janine said, in the same clipped tone as before: “If she’s really not faking it. Get her to a doctor.”

“Okay,” Mum said, laughing a little. “To the best doctor in Blytonbury, by noon.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Why wait until noon?”

“Fine. Ten.”

“Better.” Another pause. “Let me know how she’s doing.”

“Will do. Cheerio, Janine! Do some good out there!”

The door opened, then shut. Lizzie groaned. Do some good out there? If Janine wanted to do any good, she could start by doing it in here. Starting with, maybe, clearing off some of her stupid trophies, so Lizzie had room to put anything—

The karate trophy vibrated.

This time, there was no distraction to keep Lizzie’s eye from watching the trophy shake, as if trying not to scratch an itch. She moved her fist slightly, rotating it left and right, and watched as the trophy did the same, squeaking against the dresser as it turned.

Then she bent her arm, pulling her fist back. The trophy dragged itself across the dresser, as if on the end of a rope, until it fell. She heard it shatter, heard it explode against the floor.

Ah. Lizzie managed to hold up her hand, looking at her fingers as if she’d never seen them before. Now she understood exactly why she was about to die.

“Lizzie, dear? Is that you?”

Mum came into the room. She paused, looked down at the floor, and frowned; then she picked up one of the pieces of the broken trophy. “Did you do this?”

Lizzie didn’t respond, because she was heaving big breaths.

“And here I thought you couldn’t get out of bed.” Her mother tutted, and it almost sounded like a laugh. “Guess you’re going to school after all….”

“Mmmum?”

“Don’t Mmmum me. I took your side against your sister, and—”

Lizzie clenched her fist so tight she could feel the nails cutting the heel of her palm. The rest of the trophies shook, making a noise like an approaching train, and Mum shut up. And turned around, slowly.
One by one, the trophies shattered where they stood.

Mum yelped, shielding her face on instinct, and whirled around. “Lizzie! What’s going on?”

“Mum?” Lizzie planted her other hand behind her and pushed herself up, just a bit. “Get away from me.”

“What on Earth do you—”

“Get away from me!” Lizzie yelled, in a voice too loud for her body to have made. Mum yelped and ran.

Lizzie only hoped she was running hard enough. Whatever was building inside her, whatever was giving her this power, she was only using the tiniest fraction of it—like a pinpoint leak in a dam. Not enough to relieve the pressure, no matter how hard the water spewed from there.

It wouldn’t be long now. She heaved breaths. Slowly at first, but faster and faster, as if predicting the moment when—

Everything was rubble. And Lizzie didn’t feel dead. But she didn’t feel very alive either.

“Lizzie,” a voice shouted into her ruined eardrums. She couldn’t tell if the person was right next to her, or a million miles away. “Oh my god, Lizzie!”

Lizzie’s head flopped to the side, and she saw a woman with a hat. Then she sighed out a breath, felt something warm spreading across her leg, and then it all went dark.

Paste, slap! Do the next one. Paste, slap! Do the next one.

Akko hummed a song to herself, keeping her melody in rhythm with the work she was doing. Paste a load of Sucy’s adhesive on the wall, slap a poster over it, walk to the next available stretch of wall. She had enough posters and adhesive to cover Luna Nova, tip to toe!

That last part was probably an exaggeration—she hadn’t done the math—but she definitely had enough enthusiasm.

“Akko?” said a familiar voice—less snooty than the version imprinted upon her memory, but still recognizable. Akko turned to see Hannah England peering at one of the posters she’d put up.

“What’s a.... MOP?”

“No, read the small text,” said Barbara from next to her, leaning closer to the wall than Hannah. “Magic Outreach Program.”

“But the initials are way bigger.” Hannah backed up a few feet, holding her thumbs and index fingers at right angles to frame the poster. “Someone’s going to look at this and think, ‘Why are there a bunch of posters saying MOP in capital letters?’”

Akko rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “Well, doesn’t someone have an interest in graphic design.” Then she shook herself; they were friends now, or at least pleasant... not-quite-friends. Acquaintances! That was the word. “Yeah, it’s this idea I had the other day! Did you notice how a lot of the first years aren’t very good with magic?”

Barbara opened her mouth to answer, and then the explosion happened. Followed by the
Without conscious effort, all three of them flattened themselves against the wall. A moment later, a
tanned, muscular witch sprinted past, ducking as she ran to avoid a spell that flew over her head.
Her hair looked kind of… balloony, and kept dripping ink behind her—

“You turned my hair into an octopus!” she yelled.

“I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry let me fix it!” screamed the witch hot on her tail, wearing a hijab
and pointing her wand forward her. “Let me fix it let me fix it!”

“You turned my hair into an OCTOPUS!”

“I was trying to practice color changing spells! I was aiming for my own hair!”

“How did you miss!?”

“Mani!” Akko called out.

The other witch kept screaming as she escaped, but Mani stumbled to a halt, nearly falling over.

Akko smiled. “I know you want to fix it, but if you’re not careful you’ll probably turn her hair into
two octopuses. Trust me, I’ve been there.” She looked off into the distance for a moment, before
refocusing her attention. “Ah, memories… uh, anyway, just let her go to the nurse.”

“But, I—okay,” Mani said, staring at the floor.

“Hey, don’t worry.” Akko leaned in and chuckled. “Her hair didn’t explode, right? Progress!”

“I guess.” Mani turned away, still looking at the ground. “I’ve… got to be somewhere. Bye.”

“Bye!” Akko said, waving as if her arm were caught in a gale as Mani slumped away. “See you at
our session this weekend!” When Mani had gone completely, she turned back to face Barbara and
Hannah with a preemptive, “Be nice. I’m spending Saturdays with her trying to get her magic
under control. She really is getting better!” She tapped her chin. “What were we talking about?”

“You were asking if we’d noticed how the first years weren’t very good with magic,” Hannah said.

“And for the record,” Barbara added, “yeah.”

“Right!” Akko pointed her finger in the air. “Because a lot of them are like I was—they’ve never
had a chance to do magic before! Either because they didn’t have magic, or their families weren’t
magic, or both!” She groaned. “And don’t tell anyone, but I am sick and tired of trying to tutor
them one by one. So we’re organizing!”

“Organizing into a mop.” Hannah pursed her lips.

“Magic Outreach Program!”

The pursing of lips looked as though Hannah were trying to hold back a smile. “Like a bunch of
spongy floppy strands of yarn, organized into a majestic… mop.”

“It’s a working title, okay?”

“Then why is it on the posters?” Barbara pointed at one. It had a very well drawn (in Akko’s
humble opinion) picture of a witch riding a broom in front of a full moon, above a bunch of
tearaway strips giving a place, date, and time.

“You’re not even holding it at Luna Nova?” Hannah asked, sidling up beside Barbara again.

“Well, I asked Professor Finnelan if there was any room at school where I could be supervising a bunch of students who weren’t any good at magic, without any teachers there or anything.” Akko frowned. “She clutched her chest and said something about her pills, so I’m guessing that meant no. So we’re in the park at Blytonbury!”

“Right.” Hannah squinted at the poster. “What’s with the stick figure? And is she supposed to be riding a mop?”

“Stop with the mops—it’s a broom! Art’s hard, okay?”

“Seriously, though, the title’s on the posters.” Barbara said, a little smirk bending her mouth. “And if it’s on the posters, then when you say working title, you mean more specifically… title.”

“Forget about the poster!” Akko shook her arms as if resetting an Etch A Sketch. “The point is, someone’s gotta help all these witches, because they don’t have access to any of the resources the rest of us do!”

She stopped. She frowned. Hannah and Barbara had clamped their hands in front of their mouths, and they were shaking a bit, and luckily it didn’t take a genius to figure out what was happening. “What’s so funny about that?”

“Oh, Akko!” Hannah said, her voice muffled behind her hand—not that Akko couldn’t hear the mirth. “I know Diana told us not to make fun of you anymore, but sometimes you make it really hard.”

Barbara sucked in a big breath. “Look around you, Akko. Every student you’re trying to bundle into your mop is already in Luna Nova. You know, the best magic school in the world? What exactly do you mean, ‘don’t have access to the resources’?”

Akko blinked. “Oh, right.” She blinked again. “Oh. Ohhhhh.”

“Not to mention they’ve got all the teachers and the huge library. If they want the help, they can find it already!” Hannah rolled her eyes, then stepped forward with—to her credit—a genuine smile on her face. “Look, do you want to go get lunch together? I was wondering if we could talk about some of Professor Croix’s homework. We’ve both been having real—”

“You’re right!”

Akko surged forward and grabbed Hannah and Barbara, one by each shoulder. “The students in here do have those resources. But there’s gotta be a bunch of witches who aren’t students at Luna Nova!”

She clasped her hands together. “If I wanna be serious about this, I’ve gotta bring some of this magic to the people outside the school!” She ran off, yelling over her shoulder. “Thanks, girls! See you later!”

Barbara and Hannah were quiet for a few seconds.

“What,” Barbara eventually said, “did we just do?”
Mani’s life was one of contradictions.

On the one hand: weekends spent working with the crazy girl who’d brought back magic and decided to be everyone’s personal tutor. Days of shoving as much magical energy as she could manage into her anti-magic device, then trying the simplest spells she could think of. Succeeding only one in twenty tries—then two in twenty, three in twenty. Actual, genuine progress, Akko had said.

On the other hand: the big red F on the test she was holding. Holding in her other hand, even.

“Whoa!” yelled Tiffany’s voice to her left, and then two hands grabbed her roughly on her shoulders and yanked her to the right. Mani looked up in time to see some passersby walk thoughtlessly through the space she’d just occupied, eyes glued on his phone—but then again, she was hardly one to talk. “Pay attention,” Tiff hissed. “We’re on the sidewalk!”

Mani sighed, then folded up the test and put it in a back pocket. She hadn’t really had a chance to look around Blytonbury the previous and single time she was here, but it was a charming enough town now that she wasn’t desperately looking for the leyline. The shops looked like they’d come out of a fantasy novel, contrasted by the cars that rolled past and the people occupied with their phones.

She took a deep breath.

“What’s eating ya?” said Char, reclined upon her brooms.

“Never you mind.” Mani sighed. “Just feels like… I should be doing better. At magic.”

“Oh well.”

Tiff glanced over at Char. “Oh well? Not even a ‘sorry about that’? Not even asking what’s going wrong?”

“Whaddya want? I’m exhausted!” Char said, still lying down in a flying hammock. “Wish I was in bed,” she said, still in the same flying hammock. Tiff rolled her eyes. “Bed is great.”

“Fine. Sorry about that, Mani, and what’s going wrong?” Tiff said, turning to her.

“The teachers are saying I’m having trouble focusing on what I really want to do.” Mani sighed, then added a grumble of, “I wonder what’s distracting me. Can’t be the fear of blowing up, now can it?”

“Well, I suppose the teachers know what they’re talking about, Tiff said, smiling past her. “Just keep focusing and you’ll get it for sure! If you want, I can help you with that, if you’re not getting enough help already…..”

She kept talking. She really was nice, in her way, but she didn’t exactly know when to stop. Mani winced and grimaced, and while Tiff didn’t see it, Char seemed to. She let out a huge, attention grabbing groan that cut Tiff off. “Bed, pleeeeease. Why are we in town again at this unholy hour of morning?”

“It’s ten, Char. And we are picking up my broom, and engaging in friendly interpersonal socialization besides.” Tiff snorted marched forward, and Mani was put in mind of that friendliest of individuals, the drill sergeant.

“We can socialize interpersonally all you want in bed,” Char said, and Mani nearly choked. “And
“I mean the broom that got broken in the Forest of Arcturus.” Tiffany groaned. “The one that doesn’t try to talk to me. I swear to goodness.” She glanced over at Mani. “Why are you blushing?”

“No reason,” Mani said hurriedly. “Erm, do you know what the situation is with it? Or… her?” She squinted. “Do we call that thing… that… entity? English is confusing.” She took a breath, then plowed forward: “Do we call it the Shooting Star now, or Scarlette?”

It had only been a few days ago that Tiffany had run back to their room, ranting about how her semi-sentient broom contained the soul of an ancient and powerful witch. This had sounded cooler than it had actually ended up being: Tiffany had eventually ended up putting the broom outside at nights because, according to her, “She whispers.” And Mani was sure she heard something when there was no other sound in the dead of night—like if tinnitus had lyrics.

Tiffany had been spending time in the library recently. Maybe she’d come up with more information?

But judging by the way Tiffany was throwing her hands up in the air, probably not. “Not a clue! Not a gosh darned clue. And I still have no idea what she’s talking about… though it’s not like she does either. ‘Find the rest of me?’ But she’s right here!”

She sighed, scratching her forehead. “I guess being stuck in a broom for a thousand years messed with her—”

“Excuse me!”

That wasn’t any of them. That was a very loud, very commanding woman’s voice, and it was coming from behind them.

It also sounded outrageously out of breath. The three of them turned around to see a woman sprinting toward them, red in the face. She skidded to a halt in front of them and held up a hand. “One second,” she puffed.

Mani, Tiff, and Char waited one second. And then another thirty or so. After all, the woman had a police officer’s hat and badge and truncheon: it was probably not a good idea to leave while she was recovering. She also had a holster, though instead of having a gun, it seemed to be filled with… kindling?

Finally she stood upright. “Hello! You have just entered Blytonbury town limits!”

Stretching the definition of ‘just’ there, Mani thought. “Aren’t the town limits back there?” was what she said instead, pointing backward with her thumb.

The policewoman frowned. “Hello! You have! At some point today! Entered Blytonbury town limits! Are you with me so far!”

“Yes,” Tiff said.

The woman drew herself up even straighter. “My name is Officer Widdecombe! I have been chosen by the mayor of Blytonbury! To enforce law and order during this difficult time! Are you with me so far!”

“Yes,” Tiff said. She looked a little… annoyed was the term Mani decided on, because there wasn’t any English word she knew that precisely meant ‘feeling the emotion evoked by being
forced to watch children’s programming, the kind that asks you if you can count to five”.

“Good!” The woman straightened her uniform, as if it weren’t already entirely straight. “Due to recent events! The great Mayor Bloomington has become concerned about the misuse of magic in our community! He has become concerned that certain malicious or misguided actors! May use their magical abilities to disrupt the peace! Are you with me so far!”

“Yes,” Tiff said.

“Good! Give me your wands.”

“Ye—” Tiff said, and then blinked. “What?”

Officer Widdecombe held her hand out, and there was stillness for a second. She didn’t seem as enthusiastic at the moment—a lot more serious instead. “Your wands,” she repeated. Mani glanced down at her holster again and realized with a sudden start that it wasn’t kindling she was keeping in there.

“I beg your pardon,” Tiff said. “Is it possible that I’ve misheard you?”

“Yes it is! If you heard something that was not, ‘Give me your wands’.” Widdecombe’s fingers twitched. “Now. Or you may leave Blytonbury.”

“But… how will we get them back?”

“Upon leaving the town. You may pick them up at City Hall.” Another twitch of the fingers. “Wands.”

“Oh, I mean… one second.” Tiffany pulled out her wand, did a little motion, and mumbled something under her breath. A tag with Tiffany Vandergard on it appeared at the end of a string, tied around Tiff’s wand. Then she looked to her side. “You too, girls.”

Mani squirmed. “But….”

“We’re only going to be in town for a while,” Tiff said. “It’ll be fine, Mani. Listen to the nice policewoman, and I’ll tag your wand.”

Mani… squirmed again, but she squirmed her hand down to her belt, and squirmed her wand out of her belt, and squirmed it into Tiff’s hand. Tiff did the same incantation that Mani couldn’t really hear, and a similar tag—a bit larger, to accommodate Mani’s full name—appeared on hers. “You too, Char,” Tiff said, beckoning like the policewoman. “Come on.”

Char nodded, and reached for her belt—and then frowned. “Ah, bugger.” She patted herself down, then said in a loud voice, “Oh, I feel like a right bloody git.” She raised her empty hands and sighed in exaggerated fashion. “Forgot it at the dorm like a drongo.”

“Excuse me?” Tiff stared at her friend. “Like a what, exactly?”

“Please allow me to check that!” Officer Widdecombe shouted in her quick, staccato rhythm. “Stand up!”

Char grunted, but slid off her hammock and stood. Officer Widdecombe walked up close to her and patted her down. Char frowned with obvious annoyance.

“All clean!” Officer Widdecombe shouted, and took Tiffany and Mani’s wands. “You may keep
your brooms provided you do not use them to fly within Blytonbury airspace! Also!” she added, turning to Tiffany. “While I appreciate your willingness to comply! Do not use magic again inside Blytonbury! Or you will be fined!”

“What? But—”

“Thank you for doing your part to keep our community safe!” The woman shoved their wands into the holster, then saluted. “Farewell!” She sprinted off. A few seconds later, Mani heard a distant cry of, “Excuse me!”

Mani heaved some breaths. “Oh no,” she said. “Why did I do that.”

“Because… a police officer told you to,” Tiff explained, and Mani wished she wouldn’t. “What’s the problem?”

“You know what the problem is!” Mani rummaged in her pocket and pulled out her anti-magic sink. “I can’t vent magic without that wand!”

“We don’t have to be here all day.” Tiff probably thought she sounded comforting, or reasonable. “We’ll get my broom, retrieve our wands, and go home. You won’t have any problems in the meantime. It will be fine.”

“It’s not always consistent! What if it builds up fast today! What if…” Mani found herself at a loss for words as the fear clawed up her throat.

Char, meanwhile, did not find herself at a loss for words. “Eurrrrgh,” she said, standing with a stoop. Mani wasn’t confident she’d ever seen Char stand up straight. “Walking sucks. Why do you people do it?”

“Char!” Mani managed.

“What? Wasn’t listening. What’s happening again?”

“I’m worried I’m going to explode,” Mani said, flapping her arms, “and I don’t mean figuratively, without my wand!”

“Oh, okay. Borrow mine.”

“What? Oh, thank you.”

Mani took the offered wand and tucked it into her belt. A few seconds later, she did a double take.

“Give it back when you’re done,” Char said, slouching forward.

Tiff rounded on her, blocking her path. “Char! You lied to a cop?” she hissed.

“A bit.”

“That’s illegal!”

“It’s not.”

“But—we’re not allowed!”

“So?”
“Why? You’re violating the law!”

“I’m an Ozzie. Violating English law’s a proud family tradition.”

“This is no laughing matter!” Tiff said, as Mani laughed nervously. Tiff pointed in the direction that Officer Widdecombe had run off in. “I ought to go and tell her exactly what kind of crime you’ve just committed.”

“All right.” Char shrugged and leaned against a nearby shop. “If you don’t mind Mani blowing up. Fine by me.”

Tiff sputtered for a few seconds. “She’s not going to blow up!” Though judging by the noises she was making, Tiff might be about to blow at any second.

“How can I just say,” Mani said, raising her hand, “that I’m grateful for this act of charity?”

“Charity?” Tiff grabbed two handfuls of her hair and pulled for several more seconds. Finally she sucked in a breath and let go. “Let’s go get my broom and get out.”

“Sounds good to me.” Char yawned and slumped her way along behind Tiff. “Your broom that you can’t ride because of someone else’s made up reasons.”

“Perfectly good reasons!” Tiff groaned. “Am I the only one here who was raised to respect authority?”

“Nah.” Char was quiet for a calculated few seconds. Mani could hear the build up to the coming punchline: “Just the only one raised to respect stupid-arse authority.”

“It is not stupid! And watch your potty mouth!”

“It is. I won’t.”

“Why?”

“cuz it’s going to blow Mani up.”

“She’s not going to—”

Mani knew well enough to tune them out: this could take a few minutes. Instead she looked around for anyone else who might be watching. When no one caught her eye, she pointed Char’s wand at her magisink and whispered, “Pharus.”

The jet of light flared briefly at her wand’s point, before being immediately and harmlessly absorbed by the anti-magic sink. Mani did it a few more times, and felt lighter after each. Then she took a deep breath, smiled, and tucked Char’s wand beneath her shirt, out of sight.

“How’d you get it past her?” she whispered to Char, as Tiff went off on some monologue.


“Oh.” Mani frowned. “So you….”

“Palmed it.”

“You are full of surprises.”
“I aim to please.” Char smirked. “Or I would if I aimed for anything.”

“Are you two even listening to me at all?” Tiff yelled.

It didn’t take long to reach the Magic Item Cafe—a type of establishment Mani had never seen in Tunisia, but based on what Tiff and Char had told her, it was some sort of combination coffee shop, pawn shop, and post office. Which didn’t seem logical, but then again, it was magic.

Something else unexpected was, she hadn’t seen the throngs she’d been expecting. It was a nice day; the sun shone bright on the brisk, cool streets; this should have been prime time for witches from school to come into town to explore. And Mani had seen a few of them, but—well, they certainly didn’t seem very eager to explore. Maybe it had something to do with the wand ban.

In any case, they had arrived. The door jingled as they walked in, and Tiff said, “Hi, I’m here for a—”

“Come on in!”

Before Mani knew what was happening, the three of them were being whisked to a table and had menus thrust into their hands. “Can I start you off with water to drink?” said the proprietor, an overweight man with a mullet and unflattering beard, who nevertheless looked quite friendly. Even frantically friendly. “Or maybe lemonade?” he added.

“What? No!” Tiff put down the menu firmly. “I’m just here to retrieve my broom. Addressed to one Tiffany Vandergard?”

“Huh?” The proprietor seemed to deflate. “Oh. Okay.” He trudged back behind the counter and bent down.

Mani glanced around the cafe. It reflected the town’s lack of activity to an extreme: the only other person inside was a brunette engrossed in her textbook, with a full glass of water in front of her. “Er,” Mani said, raising her hand, “I could buy a lemonade.”

“Oh, thank you!” The man breathed a sigh of relief as he stood again, holding a long and narrow package that had to be Tiff’s old broom. Tiff vibrated as it came into view. “Sorry for the pressure, it’s just… business has been slow in the past week.”

“The anti-witch laws?” Char offered.

“Yeah, witches don’t wanna come out here as much.” The proprietor sighed. “I mean, I can see why they’d make the laws, what with that girl blowing herself up and all, but it kinda screws me up as a magic item cafe owner—”

The sound of a spittake filled the air, cutting off the proprietor’s words. When Mani glanced up at the source of the words, she saw that Tiffany’s hair was wet, and—of all people—Akko had bolted upright, flinging down her book and water. “After a girl what?” she sputtered.

“Hey!” Tiff yelled, bolting to her feet.

“Oh, hi, Tiff!” Akko cracked a brief smile. “It’s weird how we keep running into each other. Are—are you stalking me, or…?”

Tiff stared, and her hair dripped quietly on the floor.
“Anyway. After a girl what?” Akko slammed her hands on the counter.

“Look, Akko, I don’t know what to tell ya!” The proprietor shrugged. “It’s not like I was there. I mean, I heard the boom—the whole town heard that. Apparently some girl was misusing magic and blew herself up. And her house. Rest of the family got out fine, but….”

Mani covered her mouth with her hand. “Is she….”

“Oh, the girl’s alive. She’s in the hospital.”

Mani breathed out in relief.

“But a bunch of people got up in arms after that. Something must be done, etcetera.” The proprietor shrugged. “I’m not exactly a witch, so I don’t have a stake in this, but—”

“This is ridiculous!” Akko pounded her fists on the counter again. “Yanno how I had to get my wand in here, just because someone blew up her house?” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a chameleon.

Tiff stared at it. “Is that….”

“Yes, I had to transform my wand.” Akko frowned. “Which reminds me. Does anyone have a wand I can borrow, so I can untransform my wand? I didn’t really think it through.”

Mani sighed and handed Char’s over. Akko beamed. “Thanks! Metamorphie faciesse!” A puff of smoke, and she was holding two wands, one of which she handed back. “You’re a—wait, how did you sneak yours in—actually, nevermind!”

She jumped up onto the counter. The proprietor sighed but didn’t contest it. He must have met her before.

“The point is,” Akko declared, jabbing skyward, “there’s a whole town full of people who won’t have the chance to see how wonderful magic is, because of some ridiculous law! We need to show them, and get the law changed!” Her finger went down to point at the three of them. “Are you with me!”

In the few seconds that followed, Char let out a long yawn.

Akko deflated. “Girls?”

“I’m sure that if they put the law in place,” Tiffany said, wiping her hair off with a napkin and all the dignity she could muster, “then they had a good reason. So no, Akko Kagari. I’m just here to get my broom”—she stood up, walked over to the counter, and swiped the package off it, whereupon she clutched it like an elongated teddy bear —and get along with my day.”

“But—” Akko’s mouth worked for a moment. “Char?”

Char shrugged. “Sorry, big sis. Sounds like way too much effort.”

Akko sighed. “In that case, you’re probably not interested either, Mani.”

“Oh of course she isn’t,” Tiff said with a little snort. “What is it with you and dragging people along on—”

Mani held up her hand in Tiff’s direction, and looked in Akko’s. “You’re going to be teaching people?”
“Yeah! That was the idea even before I heard about this dumb ban!” Akko’s eyes started sparkling again in that inspiring, dangerous way of hers.

Mani took a deep breath and dived in. “Everyone everywhere should have the chance to learn magic.” She stepped forward. “I’m with you.”

Akko whooped and pumped a fist. Tiff’s jaw dropped. “Mani!” she hissed. “You could get in serious trouble!”

“She’ll be fine, she’ll be with me!” Akko flapped her hand, clearly heedless of the expression on Tiff’s face—the one that indicated how she saw those statements as mutually exclusive. “We’re gonna track down that policewoman and see if she’ll come around! Later, girls!”

She hopped down and grabbed Mani’s hand. “Come on! You’ll be learning too!”

Mani sighed and let herself be dragged.

Tiff grimaced. “This is going to end badly.”

“Guess we’ll see.” Char slurped up some of her water, which she absolutely did not need to do—she could have sipped it like a normal person. “Yo, shopkeep!” she called out. “Can I have some crisps?”

“It’s okay,” Tiff murmured into her package, “Tiffany’s here. We’re together again.” She patted the box tenderly.

“One order of potato chips, coming up!” The proprietor chuckled. “Man, that Akko Kagari. I remember the first time she came into this shop, and demanded to ‘borrow’ our prized Shooting Star. Guess she hasn’t changed a bit, huh?”

Tiffany’s eyes twitched. Several times.

The proprietor pulled out a bag of chips, then walked around the table and into a faceful of suddenly-standing, flammably-furious Tiffany Vandergard. She breathed in, hard, and started bellowing.

“YOU’RE THE ONE WHO CHAINED UP THE SHOOTING—”

“Officer! Helloooooooooo, officer?”

The problem with all these old English towns, in Akko’s opinion, was how they were planned. To put it another way, they weren’t planned. Houses had just kind of happened, and if they formed rows, it was a happy coincidence—but heaven help you if you were expecting a grid.

If only she could fly! At least, if only she could fly without making the person she was trying to talk to angry. Oh well! Down another alley she went.

“Akko,” Mani panted, “can we… slow down?”

“Are we going fast?” Akko slowed her pace a bit, as Mani dragged behind her—not still holding hands, because that would have made moving awkward. “It’s just a jog.”

“You… jog fast.” Mani put her hands on her knees. “And it’s… been five minutes.”
“You’re tired after that?” Akko shrugged. “You need to work on your cardio, girl.”

“Excuse me!”

“That’s her!” Akko bolted. She heard a groan from Mani behind her. Come to think of it, maybe Akko did do an unusual amount of running… or everyone else did an unusual, uh, non amount?

She burst from the alleyway, looked left, and saw Officer Widdecombe accosting some freshwitches. “Excuse me!” Akko yelled, barging forward.

Officer Widdecombe turned around, eyebrow raised.

“Hi! I’m Akko Kagari! I guess we met before, when you tried to confiscate my wand and I told you I forgot to bring one!” Akko waved cheerfully. “I don’t think I ever got your first name.”

“For the purposes of this interaction! My first name is Officer!” Officer Widdecombe nodded smartly.

Eugh. “Fine. Officer. I have a bit of a proposition for you!” She made sure to waggle her eyebrows, because that was what people did when they wanted to look intriguing.

The officer kept her neutral expression, but somehow it became more like a frown while staying motionless. Maybe it was from the slight narrowing of her eyes. The witches behind her tried to take a step forward, and her hand sprung up at them like a jump scare in a haunted house. “Don’t.”

The middle one of the three witches, a dark haired girl with her arm in a cast, glared daggers. “State your proposition!” Officer Widdecombe said.

“I was thinking….” Akko leaned closer. “So, like, did you see any of my posters? About the Magic Outreach Program?” When Officer Widdecombe’s only response was a blank stare, Akko sighed. “About the MOP?”

The recognition was immediate. “Yes! I did! I took down some of those posters! Because they were not on allowed poster-bearing surfaces!”

“Oh, great.”

“And obviously! Such a gathering would be inadvisable! Given recent events!”

“Yeah, about that.” Akko moved her hands in an uneasy way, as if kneading invisible dough. “I was thinking… what if we… did do such a gathering?”

Officer Widdecombe stared at her. Akko had been stared at like that by a lot of people, but none of them had been police officers. Even so, the practice helped. “I know it sounds crazy! And a bit illegal. But—”

“Entirely illegal!”

“But think about it. This whole thing started because some poor girl used magic wrong, right? It’s not her fault, she just didn’t know how to do it!” Akko leaned in further. “But what I’m saying is, let’s take all those kids who don’t know how to use magic, and teach them some stuff! At least the basics! So they’re being safe about it!”

Officer Widdecombe’s neutral expression was marred somewhat by a grimace. “But the law—”
“Come on!” Akko flung her arms wide. “You’re not gonna stop ‘em from doing it in their houses, right? And come to think of it, I definitely saw someone with a wand inside the city, just today!”

Officer Widdecombe looked up sharply, and Mani stiffened behind her, and Akko hurried out her next words: “I didn’t really see them up close, though. Very nondescript person. The point is,” she finished, throwing her arms down, “that you can take it from someone who knows. If these kids don’t have someone helping them, they’re gonna get into a world of trouble all on their own. But with us keeping an eye out….”

Widdecombe squinted. “Us?”

“Yeah, of course you’d be watching to make sure it was okay!” Akko put on a winning smile—and she did intend to win. “Think about it! Your oversight, and my teaching, working together to help keep a generation of witches out of trouble, and keep the peace even better than before! Are you with me so far?”

Officer Widdecombe looked down and to the side. Other than her frantic sprinting from checkpoint to checkpoint, it was the first time Akko had seen her in any position other than ramrod-straight. “That… does make sense,” she finally said, in a more normal tone.

Akko beamed.

“However!”

Oh, okay. Akko would just go screw herself, then.

Officer Widdecombe went rigid again. “While that idea sounds reasonable in principle! I do not have enough faith in your character! To believe you could effectively teach! A large group of witches!”

Akko groaned, looking off to the side. But then she stopped groaning, and started thinking.

“Your clothes are disheveled! Your manner is sloppy! I do not believe! You would be a decent teacher!”

“So….” Akko frowned, but she felt like smiling, and she wasn’t sure that the corners of her mouth weren’t turning up. “If someone else gave you this proposal… someone super respectable and level headed… you’d be okay with it?”

“In such a hypothetical! That might be possible! But we may never know!”

Akko beamed: no point trying to hide it now. She whirled around to Mani. “I’ll be back in, like, half an hour!”

She sprinted away, toward the leyline connection, and incidentally past the three witches whom Officer Widdecombe had accosted. “Now!” Widdecombe was saying. “I believe I was confiscating your wands!”

Akko glanced back, just in time to see the black-haired girl with a look of pure venom on her face.

“Hello,” said the calm, measured voice of Akko’s favorite person in the world. “My name is Diana Cavendish. I trust this resolves the matter?”

Akko was smiling so hard she was worried her mouth would start touching her eyes.
Officer Widdecombe looked up from where they'd found her: panting against a wall. “You,” she managed, and held up a finger. “One second.”

“It’s quite all right,” Diana said. “I can do the talking.” She smiled gently. “It looks as though you recognize me.” Officer Widdecombe clearly wanted to say something, but she didn’t have enough of her breath back to do anything other than nod. Diana continued: “Yes, I imagined so.”

Akko smiled a little wider, reflecting that only Diana could have said that without sounding arrogant. “And if what Akko has told me is correct,” Diana said, “you’re commendably amenable to the idea of holding public magic classes, on the sole condition that they are properly overseen.”

“Sure,” Officer Widdecombe said.

Diana’s smile tilted a little at that. Not enough to really be noticeable, and certainly not enough for most people to call it a *smirk*, but then again, Akko had insider knowledge. “Well, in that case I don’t see any more reason for delay. Do you?” She strode forward.

Akko strode forward right next to her, and slipped her hand around Diana’s. “You’re the best.”

Diana made a little ‘mm’ noise of discontentment. Well, that wasn’t exactly it—more like contentment that knew it should be discontented regardless. “Akko, we’re in a busy public street.”

“You’re still the best in public.” Akko made a grumpy little groan in her throat, but let go regardless. She knew the Hierarchy, after all, and this was Level Three. She could content herself with being right in Diana’s personal space. “What I mean is, thanks for coming to help.”

“Of course.” Diana smiled, just enough for Akko to see the note of humor in it. “Keeping you out of trouble is one of my foremost responsibilities, after all.”

“And getting you into trouble is one of mine!” Akko sidled a little closer and rested her head on Diana’s shoulder, because to hell with Level Three, actually. It wasn’t actually more comfortable —Diana was kind of boney—but that was so not the point. “We are such good girlfriends.”

Diana sighed, but tilted her own head so that it rested on Akko’s. Akko got a sensation inside her body like the New Year’s ball dropping in Times Square.

And then she tilted it away. “She’s looking at us,” she said. Akko sighed. The thing was that dating Diana Cavendish was, of course, the best thing in the world. Except for those things about it that… weren’t. Like the Hierarchy.

When they were alone Akko got Level One access to cuddling with Diana—nothing was off the table, except stuff that was explicitly sexual, and to be honest Akko wasn’t sure if she was ready for that either so that was fine. Level Two applied when in the walls of Luna Nova, or otherwise only in the company of friends. Hand holding, quick hugs, and that sort of stuff were allowed.

Level Three was in public. It was right now. It sucked. Akko didn’t push it any further, but she knew that one day she’d need to convince Diana to get rid of Level Three. And maybe make some pushes toward opening up the hitherto undreamt of Level Zero.

Oh well. That was a discussion for another time.
A beam of light shot up from Akko’s wand and exploded into noiseless fireworks far above the park (Officer Widdecombe had insisted upon the noiseless part). “Welcome,” Akko declared, dappled by multicolored light from above, “to the world of magic!”

There were about a dozen people there to be declared at, maybe two dozen tops—and that was including Mani, Akko, and Diana. Some were about Akko’s age, most were pre-teens, and a few seemed to be in at least their twenties. Mani looked a bit uncomfortable, since she was sitting next to the littler kids, but she always looked a bit uncomfortable. On the other hand, everyone else looked pretty excited to be there.

So Akko beamed from her position on the gazebo. Diana stood beside her, smiling in a rather more measured fashion. Officer Widdecombe was off to the side, leaning against a tree, watching everything with eyes that didn’t seem to blink enough.

“And welcome,” Akko continued, waving her wand in front of her, “to the first ever meeting of the Magic Outreach Program!” The sparkles shimmered their way into being words: namely, the Magic Outreach Program.

One of the younger kids’ eyes lit up, and he yelled, “Mop!”

“No, it’s not….” Akko sighed. “Okay, sure, fine. The first ever meeting of the MOP.”

“Mop! Mop! Mop!” The rest of the kids took up the chant. The adults looked on with bemusement.

“Please stop chanting,” Diana said. A few seconds later, when that obviously didn’t work, she did a little motion with her wand and said, “Ssh.”

A cold wind blew over the gathering, coming straight from Diana’s wand. As it rustled the grass, and snatched at the leaves on the trees, and tousled the children’s hair, the noise it made echoed Diana’s “Ssh.” This time, it worked. The youngsters fell quiet, awe in their eyes.

“Thank you!” Akko waved. “That genius standing next to me is Diana Cavendish, and I’m Atsuko Kagari but you can call me Akko, and we’re going to start teaching you how wonderful magic is, and how to use it to do cool stuff!” She beamed, then glanced at Officer Widdecombe, who was giving her the stinkeye. “Aaaaand, of course, how to use it responsibly and safely!”

She hopped down the steps of the gazebo, spreading her arms wide. “So, before we get started. Any questions?”

There were a few precious seconds of silence, and then one child spoke up. “Are you really the witch who rode that weird shiny broom?”

Akko’s mouth stayed open.

“And then that weird red pointy broom?” the child continued.

“I, um, I meant about the class—”

“How did you breathe in space!” one of the teenagers called out.

“Can you show us how you stood on a broom?” cried another.
“How did you get on all our TVs?”

“That’s actually a good question,” one of the older would-be witches said. “How did you get on all our TVs?”

“Erm,” Akko said. The heat was rising in her face. “I guess I could ask Professor Croix—”

“Where’d that missile come from?”

“Who were those other witches who helped you two up? We didn’t get a good look at their faces in the broadcast!”

“How’d you stop the missile?”

“Are you really the reason we can use magic now?”

“Can I have your autograph?”

“Can we take a selfie?”

“Can you sign my face?”

They were all staring at her with those huge, adoring eyes. All that expectation.

Akko found herself hyperventilating. “I, um…” She held up one quivering index finger. “I… will be right back!” And with that, she bolted around the back of the gazebo, and let herself breathe a mile a minute. The sweat gathered at her temples.

All that expectation.

It was probably only a few seconds later, even though it felt like an hour—but eventually, another sound penetrated her world of clammy skin and pounding heartbeats. “What’s wrong, Akko?” Diana said.

Akko looked up to see Diana standing over her, leaning on the gazebo’s railing. She glanced back behind Diana to see a floating message that probably said “We’ll be right back”, not that she could read it backwards, and it seemed to be playing elevator music. Behind that, the prospective witches were all looking on in confusion.

“You can’t possibly be suffering stage fright,” Diana said, in a tone that sounded like she was thinking out loud more than talking to Akko. “I distinctly remember you performing for a much larger crowd at the Samhain Festival. And on the day of Starfall, when you performed for Planet Earth herself.”

“Totally different,” Akko mumbled.

“How, exactly?”

“Apparently, I have a reputation now!” She threw up her hands, wailing, “I’ve never had a reputation before! I mean, I’ve had a bad reputation before, but that was fine!”

She heard shimmering, and looked up to see a glimmering hemisphere around them: it looked like Diana had cast a zone of silence. Diana pocketed her wand and frowned, leaning forward. “Bad reputations are… good?”

“Bad reputations are great! You’ve got nowhere to go but up!” Akko groaned. “But now they think
I’m some kind of super cool celebrity witch! And I mean, like—have you met me? What if I let them down?” Her head slumped forward. “What happens when I’m not the super cool girl who brought back magic that they’re expecting?”

Diana made a little noise in her throat, and unless Akko was very wrong indeed, it sounded like a chuckle. “I think I know what that kind of pressure is like.”

“How could you possibly—” Akko cut herself off. “What am I saying? Of course you know exactly what that’s like. Way better than I do.” She sighed. “It sucks, doesn’t it?”

“Hmm.” Diana hopped up over the railing, then let herself down so she was sitting next to Akko. She sat with her knees by her chest: it was presumably the preferable alternative to letting her legs touch the dirt. “Perhaps not as much as you’d think.”

“Mm?”

“To begin with,” Diana said, looking Akko in the eyes, “whose good reputation allowed you to hold this lesson in the first place?”

“Oh. Duh.” Akko smacked herself in the forehead with her palm.

“Precisely. Listen.” Diana put her arm over Akko’s shoulders. A rare case of Level Two contact, but everyone who might see was on the other side of the gazebo, and the park was otherwise empty. “You’re on your way to becoming a truly great witch, and with that comes a reputation—but it’s not a price you have to pay. It’s another asset, another tool you can use, like your magic.”

She laughed a little. “I mean, look at me—I’m minor nobility trying to restore my house’s good name. And between my magic and my reputation, I can say with absolute certainty that my reputation is proving more vital in that crusade.”

Akko stared. The idea of something being more powerful than magic… that was going to take some time to believe.

Diana laughed a little more. “I see that look on your face, but it’s true. And now you have that power too. They’ll listen to you out there—they may even hang on your every word—and all you have to do is be the amazing witch I already know you are.”

Akko took a deep breath. It was easier to breathe deep, looking at Diana’s smile.

“Excuse me.”

The two of them looked up to see that Officer Widdecombe had entered their zone of silence. “Is this thing going to continue, or am I going to tell the crowd to disperse?”

Diana hurriedly removed her arm from Akko’s shoulder: it was time for Level Three again. She then stood and tapped her wand twice against the inside surface of the hemisphere: it vanished as instantaneously as a soap bubble being popped. “I believe we’re ready. Isn’t that right, Akko?”

Akko bolted to her feet with a beaming grin for an answer. She whirled around, vaulted the gazebo’s railing in a single bound, and sprinted back to where the students were waiting. “Thanks for waiting!” she said, waving her hand to clear away Diana’s ‘We’ll Be Right Back’ message; the accompanying music also ground to a halt. “Now, let’s see here….”

She looked out at the witches, went eenie meenie miney mo in her head, and pointed at a young girl. “Hey there! I’m Akko, what’s your name?”
“Stella!”

“Like a star? Your name’s so cute!”

Stella pouted. Her hair was dark brown and messy. “I’m not cute!”

“That’s okay, because it’s also cool and awesome!”

Stella’s face lit right up.

“Step right on up, Stella, because you’re gonna be our first volunteer!” Akko gestured with a big smile, and Stella got to her feet with all the bouncy energy of a ten year old. “All right, so what I’m gonna want you to do is….”

Akko pursed her lips. Actually, Stella was missing something kind of important. She whirled around, saw that Diana and Officer Widdecombe had come back around the gazebo, and zeroed in on the latter. “Hey! Can I borrow one of your wands? You’re not using em, right?”

Officer Widdecome blanched. “Well… erm….”

“It’s for a good cause and you know it!”

“… fine.”

“Thanks!” Akko reached in, grabbed one at random, and came up with a nice short wand—perfect for a new learner, especially a child with small hands. “All right, Stella!” She bounced back to the kid. “You’re gonna have to give this back, but for now, this can be your wand!”

She looked at it with, appropriately to her name, stars in her eyes. “Wow. But… how do I….”

“Wanna see how?” Akko bent down and picked up a leaf from the ground. It was fall, after all, so there wasn’t a shortage. She let it rest in her open palm, and crouched down to present it to Stella. “I’m gonna tell you how to lift up this leaf.”

Stella looked at the leaf and gulped.

“Yeah, it’s intimidating, isn’t it? But that’s okay.” Akko put on her best smile, and she had quite a lot of options to choose from, so that was saying something. “The spell is **Adcaelum**. No special wand movements or anything—just a word. Try saying that.”

“Ad… **adcaelum**.” Stella held the wand out toward the leaf. “**Adcaelum**!” But nothing happened. Her lip trembled. “It didn’t….”

“Hey, listen!” Akko hopped a little closer, still crouched. “It’s gonna work. Can you believe that for me?” When Stella still looked unsure, Akko put a serious expression on her face. “I’m serious. That’s the first rule of magic: you have to believe. You have to believe that you have the power to change the world—and I believe that you do, Stella.”

She smiled again. “So I want you to tell me. Can you change the world?”

“I… can?”

“Come on! I want you to make me believe it too!”

“I can!” Stella put more force into it this time.
“Then say the spell with me, after I count to three! One, two, three—”

They called out the spell together. “Adcaelum!”

A little wind tickled at Akko’s hand, so soft that it might not have been there at all. The leaf rose into the air, dancing on the phantom updraft. Stella watched it fly with her mouth in a huge, gasping O.

“You did it!” Akko stood and thrust her fists into the air. “You did awesome! And only in three tries—it took me, like, fifty tries to pull that off! You must be some kind of natural, Stella!”

Stella looked like she’d just gotten the world’s best Christmas present, and….

For a long time, Akko had been really confused about something. Specifically, ever since she’d learned that, like Clark Kent hiding the true identity of Superman, her mild-mannered teacher ‘Ursula Callistis’ had always been the one and only Chariot du Nord. After the dust had settled, and after Akko had really managed to start believing it, she’d had one overriding question: of all the things that Chariot could have become after going into hiding, why had she decided on being a teacher?

And now Akko had the answer, encoded inside a little girl’s smile. “Come on, everyone!” Akko yelled, looking at the group. “She did it! Clap for her, she’s earned it!”

It took a while, and she had to keep encouraging them, but her little group did eventually break out into full-fledged applause. Stella, for her part, was blushing heavily. “No, stop!” she said.

Akko laughed. “Okay, so I’m gonna get all of you some wands—at least, as many as I can manage—and you’re all gonna have the chance to start on this! Let’s get some learning done!”

Akko bounded back to Officer Widdecombe, grabbed a handful of wands from her holster (without asking), and started distributing them among the students. “Hey, I—” Officer Widdecombe started saying, but then she sighed. “Nevermind.”

Diana smiled at her. “You’re feeling it, aren’t you?”

“Feeling what? I mean—feeling what!” Officer Widdecombe straightened to attention.

Easily suppressing the desire to roll her eyes, Diana said, “Contagious enthusiasm. She does it to everyone.”

“Is that so!”

Yes. Yes, it was so.

Diana leaned her forearms on the gazebo railing, looking out over the training. The witches had mostly started by picking up leaves, although a few of them seemed unusually ambitions: they’d chosen pinecones instead. In only half a minute, leaves were soaring into the air.

And they were all hanging on Akko’s every word. Diana had to chuckle: how had Akko believed she wouldn’t be able to do it?

“Excuse me!” The voice broke Diana’s reverie, and she looked over to Officer Widdecombe, who continued, “I must report to Mayor Bloomington! And give him the rest of the wands I have collected! Can I trust you to keep this orderly!”
“I daresay you can.”

“Thank you! Do not try anything funny!” And with that, Officer Widdecombe jogged off the gazebo and into the street, in the direction of City Hall.

Diana allowed herself an even wider smile. This was what winning looked like.

Mayor Bloomington stared at the paltry array of wands on his desk. “This is not enough,” he said, and tossed them over his shoulder to land, rattling, in what he’d called the ‘collecting basin’. Officer Widdecombe tried not to think about what it actually looked like.

“Sir!” she said instead.

“You’ve been out all morning, Officer. Are these the only wands you’ve collected?” He stared out at her from behind his desk, through thick round glasses.

He was a great man. He had to be, after all: he was the mayor. In certain respects, time spent behind a desk had made him even greater, and when he walked he did it with a cane, to support his grandeur and respectability and, if Officer Widdecombe was being honest, absolutely obese quantity of body fat. But he’d led the town through thick and thin. She could trust him.

So she saluted and said, “No, sir! I donated some of them!”

Bloomington’s eyes narrowed. “Elaborate.”

“Sir! There was a gathering in—”

“Inside voice, Janine. Sit down.”

Officer Widdecombe—as far as she was concerned, her first name was Officer while on duty, no matter what the mayor said—sighed and sat in the room’s other chair, rather plainer than the mayor’s. “Sir. I was approached by two witches, one of whom was Diana Cavendish, and they convinced me to allow certain restricted magical practice in Bloomington Park. Their logic, which I find agreeable, is that….”

The mayor sighed and rubbed his temple, hiding one of his eyes from view. Janine found herself trailing off. “By practicing magic… they’ll be better at using it… so there will be fewer… accidents.”

She looked up to avoid the gaze of his eye. This room was heavy—not just literally, but weighted with history and tradition. Portraits of the mayor’s (rather less flabby) forbears lined the walls, each one with his own mayoral sash, and the furniture all looked older than her great-grandfather. All dark colors, thick expensive carpets, and thick oak. Even the security guards on either side of the room looked heavy: two men in black suits, sunglasses, and with shaven heads, who looked like they could hit the weight limit on an elevator by themselves.

It all felt like insulation from the excitement she’d been swept up in outside. Those two witches had seemed to make such sense outside, but in here….

“Janine,” the mayor said, clasping his hands as if saying grace, “you’re breaking this old man’s heart. Did you know that?”

“Sir?”
“I gave you specific instructions. You were supposed to take every wand you could find and bring them here, and let me put them in that collection basin—” he pointed at the ‘basin’ “—so that no one could use them for ill. And what do you tell me?”

“Sir, they were practicing basic spells—”

“And you trust those witches to keep doing that?”

“I was overseeing them to make sure—”

“And who’s overseeing them now?” Bloomington leaned forward.

“Ah—”

Bloomington shook his head sadly. “My own most trusted officer. I can’t believe you would betray me like this. Taking the word of some teenage witches over mine.”

He sounded so hurt that Officer Widdecombe couldn’t help but stutter. “But, but sir—”

“And I especially can’t believe that you would betray your family.”

Janine fell silent.

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten,” he said, “what happened to your sister when she misused magic. Don’t tell me you’ve been seduced into thinking that any magical activity can be tolerated.” He pushed himself to his feet with some effort, looming over her as best as he could despite his height. “You wouldn’t do that, would you? You wouldn’t betray your family like that?”

Janine gulped.

Bloomington’s arms shook, and he sank back into his chair. “Go to the park,” he said, quite amicably. He was smiling again. “Force the gathering there to disperse. And bring their wands to me. So I can keep this town safe.”

“Sir!” Officer Widdecombe bolted to her feet.

“That will be all.” He flapped his hand again. “Dismissed, Officer.”

“Sir!” She saluted, turned on her heel, and marched out of the officer. It would be all right. After all, the mayor was a great man.

They’d almost all graduated to pinecones, and the air was thick with them. Mani’s kept flying too high, and Akko thanked her lucky stars that there didn’t seem to be any airplanes in the sky over the town. “You are all doing so great!” she yelled. “You’ve all learned so much already, and it’s only just noon!”

“No, not quite like that,” Diana said, standing near one of the older witches-in-training. “You’re overthinking a very basic spell. You don’t need to move your wand at all.”

And Akko was learning so much too. She’d learned that Stella’s mom hadn’t even been a witch, and she’d never even known anyone who was, so she didn’t have any clue about magic—not like that was stopping her from trying her hardest, and her parents were very excited to see how it would turn out. She’d learned about a sullen teenager Claire, who wouldn’t smile about magic unless Akko caught her ought of the corner of her eye. But that was fine: it still counted!
She’d learned a dozen names and a dozen stories. And now… “I don’t think I caught your name?” she said, trotting up to the last witch who was still on leaves.

“Adcaelum, dammit—” The woman, whose hair was flecked with gray—they’d really gotten all comers at the class!—jabbed her long thin wand at a leaf, over and over, to no effect. Then she looked up at Akko and said, “Oh, hello, Miss Kagari.”

“Please, call me Akko!” Akko beamed. “And you?”

“Karen.”

“Well, hi, Karen! What’s up?”

“No this leaf.” Karen sighed—not a long drawn-out sigh, but a short businesslike one. She seemed like she wanted to be done with all this magic stuff and go home, and that set Akko’s face a-frowning. “I don’t… seem to have the knack. Maybe I’m too old for all these new tricks….”

“No, nononono, don’t be so down on yourself.” Akko winced: she’d heard this song and dance before. “Look, let’s… back up. What does magic mean to you? When you’re casting this spell—” Akko flicked her wand out, murmured, the words, and the leaf shot into the air before drifting gently back to earth “—what are you doing it for? What’s your big goal?”

“Well, I….”

“If you don’t know, then choose something!”

“Well…” Karen sighed, and this one was more drawn out. “I could probably have an easier time running my bakery if I could use magic. It’s a lot of work and I don’t have that many employees… er, pardon me? Did I say something strange?”

It took Akko a moment to realize her jaw had gotten a bit saggy. “Flores Flours?” she said. “On Church Road?”

Karen’s eyebrows went up. “You’ve been?”

“Only all the time!” Akko’s mouth was open again, but now in a smile. “Your everything bagels are great, and your ice cream is amazing!”

“We… don’t actually make the ice cream ourselves—”

Akko stamped her foot. “Take the compliment! Now come on, are you gonna have the best darn bakery in Blytonbury or what?” She whipped her wand out again, knelt, and pointed it at the ground. Karen followed after a few seconds. “Say it with me after three. One, two three—”

“Adcaelum!” Karen said. Akko didn’t say it. The leaf flew regardless.

“You were great!” Akko stood and gave her two thumbs up. “I knew you could do it!”

Karen grinned. God, Akko loved the smiles. She could live on those smiles. “Thanks,” Karen said. “I’m sorry I needed you to give me a confidence boost, miss Kagari… sorry, I mean Akko.”

Akko leaned in, glanced around, and said in a low voice: “Don’t tell anyone. The best witch I’ve ever seen has confidence issues sometimes. Lots of times. If it doesn’t make her any less great, then—whoa, whoa, sorry, gotta go!”

Because she’d just spied something from the corner of her eye: Stella had found a rock about as
large as her fist and was pointing her wand at it. “Whoa there,” Akko said, hurrying over to her. “If you lose control of that it could fall and hurt you. Are you sure about this?”

Stella nodded hard.

“All right.” Akko pulled out her own wand, and held her other hand out too. “Then I’ll be here with you to make sure it’s okay. Give it a shot!”

Stella held out her hand that had the big gray stone in it. She took a deep breath. “Adcaelum. Adcaelum. Adcaelum!”

The rock wibbled, and wobbled, and by degrees it rose into the air. “You’re doing it!” Akko said, still holding her wand out and keeping her eyes fixed on the stone. “You’re really doing it!”

It rose higher and higher, bringing it above Stella’s head—

“Excuse me!”

The yell broke Akko’s concentration, and she glanced behind herself. An instant later, she realized that if it was breaking her concentration, it would also be breaking Stella’s—

She gasped, and whipped around, and shoved out her hand. She caught the rock a centimeter from Stella’s head. A few seconds later, Stella looked up and blinked.

Akko felt her face go all angry. “Officer Widdecombe,” she said, standing and turning around, “you’ve gotta be more careful with—”

She stopped talking. Officer Widdecombe was holding her truncheon. In a few seconds, the ambient noise of witches practicing magic ground to a halt, followed shortly by the sound of pinecones falling like rain.

“Did I just see!” Officer Widdecombe said, her expression a heck of a lot less neutral than before. “That that young girl! Was nearly harmed! Because she was practicing magic!”

Akko glowered. “I caught it, and anyway Stella would have been fine if you hadn’t—”

“You’re the one who misbegave them to us!”

“Attention, witches!” Officer Widdecombe hit her truncheon against the palm of her hand. “Under direct orders from the esteemed Mayor Bloomington! You are hereby ordered to surrender your misbegotten wands! And disperse from this illegal gathering!”

“What?” Akko stepped forward, her hand clenching into a fist. “Misbegotten? You’re the one who misbegave them to us!”

“I repeat!” Widdecombe put her hands around her mouth like a loudspeaker. “Surrender your wands! Disperse! Or face additional punitive action!”

Stella tapped Akko’s leg. “Does disperse mean leave?”

Akko nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

Stella’s face got all angry. “Hey!” She stepped forward and pointed her wand. “You can’t make me leave! I’ve got a magic wand! Watch this!” She pointed at a pinecone on the ground and yelled, “Adcaelum!”

The pinecone shook and juddered as it ascended, as if riding an elderly elevator.
Officer Widdecombe smiled. “That’s very impressive!” Akko could hear the sarcasm even amid all that loud enthusiasm. “I have a magic wand too!”

She stepped forward and held out her truncheon. “It’s really good at making people do what I want!” And then her voice dropped to a low, dead-serious tone. “And I know how to use mine. Stop this…” She gestured at the pinecone. “Uprising. Surrender your wand. Disperse.”

The pinecone shook one last time, and fell to the ground. Stella’s wand hand sank down, and Akko saw the fear in her eyes. Then she stared at Officer Widdecombe. The woman didn’t seem at all like the obviously-wrong-but-still-kind-of-reasonable person she’d managed to sway earlier. It was like someone else had gone inside her head and injected a whole load of jerkhole into it—if she was willing to threaten a child who didn’t even know how to use a wand!

But Akko did know how to use a wand—

“All right, everyone. You heard her.”

Akko’s eyes widened, and her rising wand stopped rising. She turned around and looked at Diana, because there was no way that Diana had just said that—

“Give those wands to me,” Diana said, “and I’ll give them back to Officer Widdecombe. Let’s do this in a nice, orderly fashion.” She collected the wands back from their temporary owners, as Akko’s lower jaw sagged, until finally Diana had reached Stella. “You too, Stella,” she said.

Stella didn’t let go. “Come on,” Diana said, crouching down. “You have to do what the nice police officer says. It’s not even your wand anyway. Please.” She reached out and held the wand, and then pulled a little, and finally Stella let go.

“There we are.” Diana stood, walked over to Officer Widdecombe, and handed over the wands. “Take good care of these,” she said.

Officer Widdecombe took them and shoved them in her holster. Then she held her hand out again.

“And yours!”

“Oh, no.” Diana smiled. “Akko and I will be leaving presently. You can hardly object to us keeping our wands on the way out of town, can you?”

Officer Widdecombe stared her down for several long seconds, only to be met with Diana’s continued disarming smile. Then she turned on her heel and marched away. “Disperse!” she called again, over her shoulder. “This meeting is over!”

Before long, she was gone. There was a little rustling of wind on the fallen leaves, a little murmuring as the would-be witches disappeared, and that was all.

“Come on, Akko.” Diana walked up to her, a somber look in her eyes. “Let’s go home.”

Akko’s jaw was still open. She followed Diana numbly for a few steps, then forced herself to catch up. She held up her open palms, angled her eyebrows, leaned in toward Diana: Akko might not have known sign language, but it didn’t matter, because this was the universal gesture for, What the hell was that?

Diana rolled her eyes, breathing out. “Don’t look at me like that. We got a direct order from an officer of the law. There was nothing we could do.”

“There’s always something we can do! If we believe in ourselves!” Akko jabbed a thumb at her
chest. “I do! Don’t you?”

“If I thought we could have convinced her otherwise, I promise I would have tried. But you saw her.” Diana sighed. “She would not have taken no for an answer. The mayor must have had words with her.”

“Then why don’t you have words with her back? What’s the point of having a reputation if you can’t use it to convince people?” Akko sucked in a breath. “Diana, aren’t you with me?”

“Akko!” The word was a shout. Akko went quiet. Diana continued walking for several seconds, her hands balled into fists, before her next words came out. “Sometimes, to preserve your good reputation, you have to choose your battles. You have to know when you can stand firm, and when you have to give in.”

Akko waited a few seconds before talking, too. “So it is a price.”

“No, it’s just—” Diana turned around and faced Akko. “Look. We helped anyway, didn’t we? We showed them how good magic can be. And a little of how to use it responsibly. Maybe that’s enough so there won’t be any more horrible accidents. Maybe that will make things better all on its own.”

“Maybe?” Eyes narrowed, chest hurting, hands balled into fists, Akko leaned forward.

“We’ve done the most we can do. Now things just have to… play out.” Diana sighed. She reached out for Akko’s fists, held them one by one, and uncurled them so they were open hands again. “I… I’m sorry it can’t be another way.”

She tried to tug at Akko, but Akko stayed firmly rooted to the spot. Diana frowned, or maybe pouted. She turned around. “I’ve got homework I must focus on. When you return to Luna Nova, you can find me in my room if you want me.”

She walked away, and Akko watched the back of her hair until she was out of sight.

Akko snorted through her nose, because her lips were closed and trembling.

“Excuse me? Akko?”

She whirled around. “What do you—” And then she cut herself off, because the Excuse me? was coming from Mani, not the cop. She’d flinched back from Akko’s outburst, too. “Sorry,” Akko said, scratching her neck. “Confused you with someone else. What’s up?”

“Just… I was going to go back to the school. But are we still going to do tutoring next weekend?” Mani crossed her arms in front of her stomach, but rather than looking cross it was more like she was hugging herself. “That was really helpful. Even if you have to do it one-at-a-time again….”

“I guess so.” Akko slumped against a nearby building. “I guess it’s the most I can do, huh?”

“It doesn’t seem right.” Mani looked down. Her fists, with no obvious conscious effort, curled into tight fists. “It doesn’t seem fair.” The skin on her fingers turned red, they were clenching so hard.

Akko tilted her head, looking at this girl. This girl who sometimes seemed to have about of half of Lotte’s assertiveness, and other times seemed to be so filled with anger…. “Can I ask you something?” Akko said. “You’re really into… 'fairness'. How’d that happen?”

“What?” In her distraction, Mani’s hands unclenched somewhat. She looked up at Akko. “Why do
“I don’t need to! It’s just….” Akko threw her hands up. “I feel like once I know what someone’s passionate about, and why they’re passionate about it… I can understand them. I can get through to them. Lotte, Sucy, Diana….” She smiled. “I bet I could even convince Officer Widdershins if I knew what her deal was. So… what happened with you, Mani? What made you like this?”


Akko leaned forward a bit. Mani seemed to be going somewhere with this: no need to interrupt. Patience is a virtue, fourth Word. Would she just keep talking already—

“A really very nice house,” Mani said. “And it’s tall too. And it’s tall enough that I can go up to the highest floor, and look out on Kairouan, and… see slums. People living in slums. A mile, maybe two, from my front door. And now?”

Mani pointed down the street, off into the distance—somewhat above the horizon. “Now I live in a castle,” she said, and Akko realized she was pointing at Luna Nova even if it wasn’t in sight. “A big fancy castle where I can learn all the magic I want. And here, right here, are people who don’t get to learn anything, and it’s. Not. Fair.”

She sucked a hissing breath through her clenched teeth. Then she winced, and looked around cautiously, and pulled a wand from somewhere hidden under her cloak. “Ugh. I think being agitated makes it build up faster.”

Akko frowned and pushed herself off the wall. “You kept that?”

“I guess Diana didn’t count how many wands she was getting. I know, I’m not supposed to, but I need it.” She pulled out her antimagic sink. “Otherwise….”

“You blow up, yeah.”

“Yes. Pharus.”

“You blow up.”

“Pharus. I… think I said yes already.”

“You blow up,” Akko said, stepping forward dumbly, “if you don’t use magic.” Then she smashed her palm into her forehead. “I can’t believe this! Why am I so dumb, I should have realized this like a million years ago! Dumbity dumb dumb Akko!”

“Wha—”

Akko surged forward and grabbed Mani’s shoulders roughly. “She didn’t misuse magic! She didn’t use magic at all! She’s like you!”

“Wheh—”

“The girl! The girl who got blown up just before this dumb anti magic law started!” Akko shook Mani. “We’ve all been acting like she made a mistake, this whole stupid time! Like she did something wrong, like it was her fault for being bad at magic! But she’s like you!”

Mani’s mouth opened. “She… she was having magic buildup?”
“I’m dead sure of it!” Akko released Mani’s shoulder and stomped away: with all this indignation, she had to vent it somehow or she would explode, so she stomped and paced. “And we’ve been acting like, oh, well it’s a dumb law, but at least it’ll keep people safe, but it won’t! It couldn’t make them less safe if it tried!”

She stomped again, and was still. “You know what that means, right?”

“I kind of hope not.”

“What it means is….” She whirled around and threw her hand down in front of Mani. “We can’t stop now. Not even close. Are you with me?”

“You know,” Char said, “I wasn’t sold on this whole shopping day thing? But this is a really nice camera.” She held it up to the thrift shop’s light. “I could take some sweet pictures with this.”

“Don’t you have a smartphone?” Tiff said, only looking at Char in her peripheral vision. Her attention was focused on a vintage broom cleaning kit. A little present, and apology, for her current favorite broom, which was currently held on her back by a high-quality broom strap. “I’m just thinking you could take photos on that.”

“Oh. You’re right.” Char hmmed, and put the camera back. “Guess I’ll just be lazy and do the same old thing I always do.”

“No, I’m just curious—”

“Why would I ever step outside my box, right?”

“I just mean, I’m surprised, that’s all. Not judging. Just surprised. Buy it if you want.”

“Meh.” Char shrugged and leaned against a shelf, one which was not itself against a wall. Tiff rushed over. “It’s bloody freakin’ expensive anyway.”

“I’ll buy you the goshdarned camera,” Tiff said, firmly getting Char off the shelf before she knocked it over. “And how is it too expensive? This is a thrift store!”

“Sign on the door says Antique.”

“Yeah, like vintage. What’s the difference?”

Char let out a snort, still leaning on Tiff. “Mate, you have unusual ideas on how much money money is.”

“Whoa, coming through!” yelled a voice from outside.

For goodness’ sake, it was like being in a horror film. Tiff found herself jumping at the sound of Akko’s voice. She was concerned she might get some sort of mental condition at this rate.

She looked outside, dreading whatever shenanigans she might come up with, and… saw Akko dog-walking. For dozens of small weiner dogs. Tiffany’s personal Akko-sense, or perhaps an Akko-nonsense-sense, was blaring at Defcon 1 regardless: somehow this was suspect, and she was gonna find out why.

“No,” Char said, holding out an arm as Tiff started marching.

Tiff pouted until her lip touched her nose. “But she’s clearly—”
“No.” Char rolled her eyes. “Or she really will think you’re stalking her.”

“But—” Tiff blinked. “Hang on, why is Mani helping her?”

“Wait, what?” Char glanced out the window.

Tiff ducked under Char’s arm and walked outside, jingling the door’s bell as she went, and called out, “Mani!”

Mani jumped as her name was called. She had been walking somewhat behind Akko, and now that she was stopped, Akko was gaining distance. “Hi, Tiff!” she said, sweating. “How’s shopping?”

“Mani, you’re sweating. What’s Akko doing?”

“What? That would be ridiculous, it’s so cool out!” Mani laughed and wiped her forehead. “We’re doing fine! The teaching magic thing didn’t quite work, so now we’re abandoning that and… well, you can see….”

She gestured vaguely. “Walking dogs,” Char finished, as she walked up behind Tiff.

“Yes! To… help the community.”

Char frowned. “Whose dogs?”

“People’s.”

Tiff squinted. Akko’s dogs were all wiener dogs. That was weird—they couldn't be that common, could they? But more than that, as she looked at them, she was fairly sure she couldn’t actually make out any differences between the dogs. Or how they walked.

“Mani,” Tiff said. “Did Akko take a bunch of the school’s spare wands, use Metamorphie faciesse on them, and smuggle them into town as dogs?”

“What?” Mani laughed in a strained way. “That would be crazy!”

“Yes, yes it would. Did she do it?”

“I…” Mani glanced around, as if seeking an exit sign during a fire, and gasped. “I need to catch up with her! Be back later!”

She ran off. “Wait,” Tiff said, and then sighed. “Oh, this is so not worth my time.”

“You know, she’s right.” Char smiled and clapped Tiff on the back. “That does sound crazy.”

Tiff growled.

From nowhere that Tiffany could see, a dark haired girl with an armcast watched Akko continue down the street.

“This is bad,” Mani said, and Akko wished she would stop because she’d said it about a dozen times now. “This is going to go very badly.”

“Okay, everyone,” Akko said, “you’re probably wondering why I had you come to this… beautiful, scenic, meeting location.”
They were under a bridge. It was a nice old bridge, and the brook it crossed made a pleasant burbling sound as it went, but still—hiding under a bridge. The witches on the other side of the brook—at least, the witches who had come, which was about half of the amount from earlier—were divided between those looking uneasily at Akko, and those looking uneasily at the mud their shoes were getting ruined in.

Akko opened her mouth to start explaining, and then Stella—who had been the first witch she’d found, and the easiest to convince—raised her hand. “Miss Akko, where’s Miss Diana?”

“Oh! She went back to school.”

“Why isn’t she here? Are you two fighting?”

“We’re disagreeing, which is different—”

“You’re fighting?”

“We’re not—”

“Girlfriends shouldn’t fight!”

Stella looked positively heartbroken. Akko winced. “Look. We each have important things we’ve gotta do. She’s gotta do… homework, and I’ve gotta tell you all something really important.”

Claire piped up. “What, did someone lose their phone at magic practice?” She clearly hadn’t: she was looking at it as she spoke.

“No, I called you here because—”

“I mean, I did find this,” said one of the witches, holding up an old flip-phone. Another witch gasped and snatched it.

“I think you all need to keep practicing magic!” Akko blurted out. “No matter what the law says!”

Silence followed. Mind, if the act of staring made noise, Akko wouldn’t have been able to hear herself think over the ten stares she was getting now. As it was, she was still having a little trouble marshaling her followup.

“I know it sounds a little crazy when I say that,” she said. “But—”

About half of the witches turned around and started walking.

“Wait!” she yelled. They kept walking. “Hear me out!”

“Um,” Claire said, walking away and still not looking up from her phone. “Like, I don’t want to get, like, arrested? So….”

“Do you want to explode?” Akko yelled.

That stopped them. Claire even looked up.

Akko pointed at Mani, who hadn’t moved if you didn’t count trembling. “Mani, tell them what happens if you don’t use magic.”

“Um….”
“Please tell them? I know it’s personal, but please.”

“I… blow myself up.”

“Exactly.” Akko took a breath. “And tell them what happens if you do use magic without being really really careful.”

“I blow other things up.” Mani looked like she wanted to disappear into her hood-thingy. Hijab, if Akko remembered correctly.

“Yeah. Because Mani’s got this thing where she’s got too much magic in her.” Akko stepped toward the witches who had been about to leave. “It’s what happened to that witch who got blown up and got this whole dumb law started. It wasn’t that she misused magic, it wasn’t her fault at all—but it could happen to any of you.”

She pointed a finger, sweeping it along so it pointed at the entire crowd. “Look. Magic is the most wonderful thing in the world, and it’s beautiful and wonderful, and I wish that was the only reason you all should learn about it… but it’s not. You’ve got to be able to protect yourselves. So….” She held out an open hand. “Are you with me?”

What followed was the physical version of an ellipsis. A pause, during which Akko wasn’t even thinking as the witches considered what they’d do. Which was good, because if she was thinking, she’d probably be panicking.

“This… blowing up,” one of the witches finally said. It was Karen the baker. “Does it happen to every witch?”

“Er….” Akko’s outstretched hand sagged. “No?”

“Then….” Karen winced. “Miss Kagari, I know you’re some high-flying celebrity, but… I have a job. We all have lives. I can’t be getting arrested for this.” She backed up. “I’m sorry, I know you mean well, but….”

Akko stared at the ground. In her peripheral vision, the rest of the witches started moving away.

“Akko?” Mani said.

“Do you think I don’t have a life?” Akko said, quietly but with a voice that carried.

And then, as they turned to look at her, and because she couldn’t think of anything else to do—she twitched her wand and turned into a peacock.

They gasped, but she wasn’t done. She jumped up and swooped in a loop-de-loop under the bridge, before changing again into a horse that cantered around in a circle—then a snorting rhino, a chomping shark, a trumpeting elephant.

Another puff of smoke, and she was herself again, and she had their attention. But it wouldn’t work twice. One last try.

“I have a life too, you know!” she exclaimed. “I’ve got a life and, yes, Stella, I’ve got a girlfriend too, and I’ve got school and classes and stuff and they wouldn’t like it if I got arrested—you think I’m not risking anything with this? But here’s the thing!” She pumped her elbows down, hands clenched in fists. “Magic is the most amazing thing in the world, and if I had to give it up to keep my life, then screw my life!”
She rushed forward and took Karen by the shoulders. “Karen! You could run your bakery better if you were allowed to use magic! Think how much work you’d save! And Stella!” She crouched down to the girl’s height. “Don’t you think your parents would love it if you showed them all the magic you could do? And I know you like magic, Claire,” she added, looking at the girl who still had her phone out, “I saw you smiling! Don't try to pretend you didn't!”

Akko held out her hands. “Magic could make your lives so much better in an infinity of ways. And you’re just gonna let this town’s single policewoman and some stupid law keep you scared? I know it’s risky! But I promise, I won’t let her arrest you, and you have the world to gain.”

She took a deep breath. “So. One last time. Are you with me?”

Now she was panicking—all in her head, thankfully; she was managing to keep her cool outside it. But inside, she was running through all the million scenarios in which this didn’t work out: the one where they laughed at her, the one where they walked away without a word, the one where they ratted her out to Officer Widdecombe—

Stella stepped forward. “Okay.”

Claire looked down at her, eyes wide. “Kid?”

“She’s the one who saved the world,” Stella said, fists on her hips as she looked back up. “If she’s not gonna let me get in trouble, then it’s fine.”

The other witches didn’t seem quite as steadfastly certain of this logic: Akko saw the shifting of feet, the grimaces. But after several seconds of this, Karen stepped forward too. “What?” Claire said. “You’re the one who just said—”

“Not having to work so hard at the bakery sounds pretty good,” Karen murmured. “And… I don’t want anyone telling me how to run my business.” She looked up. “I’m with you.”

Claire groaned. “We’re all gonna have to share one big cell…. Uuuuuuuugh.” She shoved her phone in her pocket. “Fine. With you.”

And the other witches stepped forward too, one by one. “I’m with you,” one said, and then another, over and over again. Akko’s heart swelled, as if she were the Grinch finding out the true meaning of Christmas (Amanda had showed her an old cartoon once).

“Thank you!” she yelled. She jumped up and landed with splash in the brook, arms in the air. “I’m not gonna let you down! I promise it’s not just about lifting leaves or rocks, or even venting magic to stay safe. It’s about being who you really are at witches!”

She beamed and pulled out her wand, letting it sparkle with a thought. “It’s about finding the best part of you and letting it shine! It’s about finding your—”

She stopped, because her wand was shining more than she’d intended. It shone, in fact, with seven points of light.

It’s about finding your destiny.

“Hey,” she said, her brain feeling a little disconnected from her mouth. It felt like she’d been struck with lightning, and the thunder was rocking her to the soul. “Do you girls wanna see something cool?”

They seemed generally okay with the idea, although no one nodded or anything. Then again, Akko
barely had any idea what she was doing. She was acting without thinking, and not in the way people usually accused her of, either.

“Come over here,” she said, beckoning them toward the bridge. The arch on its underside went vertical and became a wall near the water level, and she trained her attention on that wall as everyone approached.

“Er, Miss Kagari?” Karen said. “Why’s your wand doing that?”

She smiled, and it felt like something she was doing on purpose: like she was finally processing the enormity of what this meant. “It’s ‘cuz I know what I’ve got to do. And the first step of that is, I’ve got to go get someone very important. So watch this!”

She raised her wand in the pose she’d gotten to know so well. “Noctu orfei!”

The shining brightened. “Aude fraetor!”

“She’s doing the thing!” Stella pointed frantically, ecstatically, as Akko’s wand transformed into a magnificent bow. “The bow thing!” Everyone else was a bit more busy backing away in awe.

“Shiny…” Akko yelled. “Arc!”

She released. The arrow of light struck the wall opposite, and burst in a brilliant cascade of green. She heard gasps, and saw people shielding their eyes, but she just watched with a smile on her face that felt seared on.

The rushing, swirling light resolved itself into an oval, large enough for a girl her size to enter. “Be right back!” she said, and jumped in.

Diana was finding it hard to concentrate. Yes, she had a rather complicated essay on the history and development of lunar runes as a writing system, due in three days. And yes, she had a number of circuit diagrams to complete for Modern Magic, which were proving rather more difficult than that.

But Akko hadn’t come back. And if Akko hadn’t come back, id est if Akko was still in town… the conclusions wrote themselves.

She didn’t snort, or groan, and when she stood it wasn’t with any particular vehemence. But she was, perhaps, quicker than usual as she gathered her jacket, her wand, her broom, and then reached for her small moneypurse—

Light blasted through the air. Diana held her arm up across her face as papers, even whole books, flew across the room from what seemed like… some sort of green, spiraling oval.

Diana shook herself. She didn’t deal in ‘some sort of’. That was a leyline. And that meant exactly one thing. “Akko?” she said, calling out a little louder than usual, over the wind that still streamed from the portal.

An indistinct figure came into view, as if rising from deep water, until Akko burst from the leyline. “Diana!” she called. For a moment, she was holding a magnificent bow in her right hand: then it transfigured itself back into her wand.

“Akko?” she said, feeling her eyes bulge. “Is that the….}
Akko jumped forward. “I know you think we did our best! I know you think it’s time to stop trying to help those witches in Blytonbury!”

“Akko, that’s—”

“But come on!” Akko swished her wand with angry glee. “When was the last time we let impossibility stop us? I know we can help them, and I think you know why too!”

She raised her wand yet higher, and at last gave Diana enough room to speak. “The Shiny Rod? But—it’s gone.” She stepped forward, glancing at Akko’s wand. “You surrendered it to the heavens after reviving magic—”

She stopped herself. “Except… no, you used Shiny Arc to get to the opening ceremony again. I never took the chance to ask you how, but—”

“Exactly!” Akko pumped her fist, then bounced forward and took Diana by the shoulders. “It was the exact same feeling then as when I revived the Word for the first time, and it’s exactly what I’m feeling now! That—that will, that drive to show everyone just how amazing magic really is! Don’t you feel it too? Don’t you know what it means?”

“It means—” Diana gasped. “It’s… it’s still your destiny. To bring back magic—there’s still more to do.”

“Because magic isn’t back!” Akko’s mouth went to a hard line, and her eyes blazed. “Not until magic’s back for everyone. But you’re wrong about one thing.”

She bounded one step back and let go of Diana’s shoulders—only to reach out her hand. “It’s not my destiny. It’s ours, Diana.” How quickly she could change expression—where her eyes had blazed angry a moment before, now they shone bright enough that Diana could see a future in them. “You’re on the same road I am—always have been, always will be.”

She reached out further. “Come on!”

But she didn’t need to stretch herself. Diana was laughing, already stepping forward. She grabbed Akko’s hand, and let Akko’s grasp and laugh pull her close. “Thank you,” Diana said.

“Of course.”

Diana stepped in even closer, until her forehead was against Akko’s, and she felt Akko’s heat on hers. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, then opened them to see Akko, smiling so hard she looked like she was about to cry. “Together?” Diana said.

“Forever.”

Diana pulled away, but still held Akko’s hand. The portal was still open. They walked through.

“Thanks for the light show!”

Handcuffs clicked around Akko’s wrist as soon as she exited the portal.

“Atsuko ‘Akko’ Kagari!” said the loud, triumphant voice of Officer Widdecombe. “You are under arrest! For violating—”

Click. Before Akko could respond more than slack-jawed astonishment, Widdecombe had put her arms behind her back and locked the other handcuffs on. “—the Emergency Magic Restriction
Act!” she continued, and yanked Akko’s wand from her hand, and then moved left.

“Now wait just a—” Diana started, and then Officer Widdecombe had her in handcuffs too, and had taken her wand. “Hey!”

“Diana Cavendish! You are under arrest for contravention of the same act! Along with Imani bint Abdallah al Kairouani!”

Akko glanced to her right and saw Mani, slumped on the ground, arms behind her back. Quivering. Akko, for her part, felt like screaming. She and Diana, two supposed great witches (or at least one great witch—Diana—and one pretty okay witch), had just been detained in a matter of seconds. All the bright feelings inside Akko were vanishing like a bunch of bulbs burning out.

But a little note in her head told her that Officer Widdecombe seemed to be screaming louder than usual, and wasn’t looking just at her. She looked to her left, and saw a few of the witches she’d been trying to teach—Claire, Stella—peeking out from behind some trees.

“You think this is helping anyone?” Akko yelled. “You think your stupid—”

“Understand this!” Officer Widdecombe bellowed, turning to face the half-hidden witches directly. Her holster was filled with all the wands Akko had collected, for those witches! “This is what happens when you—”

“Your stupid Restriction law isn’t helping anyone!” Akko matched her, decibel for decibel. She lunged at the officer, but her foot caught on a rock, so she went sprawling into the brook. Mud splashed on her face and on her bared teeth. She spat it out and glared up.

“—when you violate the rule of law!” But Officer Widdecombe seemed determined to win the war of volume. “Don’t let me see you at it again!” Widdecombe yelled.

Claire raised a middle finger. Stella gasped.

Officer Widdecombe growled and stomped forward. Akko shoved herself forward like an inchworm and grabbed Officer Widdecombe’s boot in her teeth, and when she tried to run at Claire, she lost her balance and faceplanted just like Akko had. Akko spat out the boot and yelled, “Go!”

Now Claire and Stella ran. Rustling in the bushes around them suggested that other witches, who must have been staying around to watch, were running too.

By the time Officer Widdecombe stood up, none of the witches were anywhere to be seen. She rubbed down the front of her uniform, as if that would stop it from being soaked, and then looked around at Akko with eyes of fury. “That will not. Look good. On your record.”

Akko grinned up at her, like an enraged predator.

Officer Widdecombe stood a little straighter and started reciting: “You do not have to say anything! But it may harm your defence! If you do not mention when questioned! Something which you later rely on in court! Anything you do say may be given in evidence!...”
“My family is going to kill me,” Mani said, head clutched in her hands as if she were worried it would come off her neck. The handcuffs were off, not that it mattered.

Akko had never been in a jail cell. In some ways, it was neat, and kind of cool with how dingy it was in here—a real old fashioned dungeon kind of cell, with bars and stone and even a bit of hay. In *most* ways, she was enraged beyond the capacity for rational thought. “Let us out!” she bellowed. “Your stupid law is gonna get someone killed!”

“They’re going to do it in turns,” Mani said.

“Akko, they’re not listening.” Diana rested her head against the hard stone, sitting on the hard bench with Mani. Her eyes were closed. “Oh, a Cavendish has just been arrested. Oh, this is… new.”

“First my brother’s gonna kill me,” Mani said.

“You can’t keep us in here forever!”

“Then my father’s gonna kill me.”

“There’s never been a Cavendish in jail.”

“Then my mother. Then my uncles.”

“Are you even listening to me? Listen to me!”

“Then my aunts. Then my *grandfather.*”

“Well, maybe in the thirteenth century. If being a prisoner of war counts. I don’t think it does.”

“And my *grandmother’s* going to kill me most of all!”

“LISTEN TO ME!” Akko bellowed, and smashed her face between the bars. It hurt, it hurt a lot, but her spirit was stronger.

Okay, not that much stronger. “Ow ow ow,” she said, and then she had to yank her face out, and she said, “Ow!” She winced her way back to the bench, plopping herself down between Diana and Mani. “I'm really sorry this happened, girls. You know, when I decided I was going to directly break the town law, I wasn’t thinking about getting arrested.”

Mani squinted up at her, mouth vaguely open. Akko sighed. “Yes, it sounds stupid when I say it like that.”

“It sounds stupid no matter how you say it!” Mani bolted up. “I didn’t sign up for this!”

“You… kinda did?”

“I didn’t mean to!”

“But—but what about—” Akko held out her hands. “What about being fair? What about any of that?”
“I know, I know that’s what I said, but—”

“Bail’s here!”

Akko bolted to her feet. There was a spiral stairwell visible through the cell bars, and light came down the stairwell, and in the light she saw a descending silhouette. Judging by how it was flat on top, like a policewoman’s cap, that had to be Widdecombe. It was certainly her voice. “Inmate! You are free to go! Pending further trial!”

Akko felt her face light up with something other than physical pain. And then it fell a second later, as she noticed the singular. Inmate. So either she or Diana wasn’t getting out….

“Mani, come on! Get out of there, this is ridiculous!”

And then Akko’s face fell even further. That was Tiff’s voice, and Tiff’s silhouette coming down behind Officer Widdecombe’s. And the slouching silhouette behind her was probably Char.

A few seconds later, Tiff’s face came into view. She looked as incredibly unimpressed as her voice had sounded. Akko forced on a smile anyway. “Tiff! Buddy!”

“You had better not be about to ask whether I’m paying your bail.”

Okay, the smile wasn’t working. How about an exaggerated pout? “But we’re pals! Chums! We could even have a secret handshake—we don’t, sure, but we could!”

“You got Mani thrown in jail!” Tiff took a breath to recollect herself. “So no! No, I am not spending one penny bailing you out! You made your bed, now lie in it.”

Then she glanced over at Diana. “And you.” Akko glanced at Diana, who still had her eyes closed and head leaned against the wall. She was either meditating or catatonic, and Akko couldn’t tell. “I’d expect this sort of craziness from Akko. But you?” Tiff frowned. Diana didn’t react at all.

“Step away from the bars!” Officer Widdecombe had been rummaging in a drawer a few feet away from the cell. Now she returned with an old-fashioned key in one hand, and her truncheon held at the ready in the other. Akko growled, but stepped back as she unlocked the cell.

As soon as it was open, Mani scurried, and Officer Widdecombe slammed the door behind her. “Thank you!” Mani said, rushing in front of Tiff and embracing her.

“Of course. What are friends for?” Tiff awkwardly patted her on the back, but adopted a sterner tone as she continued, “Just don’t go and get arrested again.”

“I’m not going to do that.” Mani displayed a stressed little grin. “My family’s still going to kill me before I get the chance, you see.”

“You may pick your wands up at City Hall!” Officer Widdecombe yelled.

“Right.” Tiff looked up. “Now you two think about what you’ve done,” she said. Akko had to roll her eyes at that. Then Tiff turned to go, leading Mani back up the stairs.

Char stayed for a moment. She wore an old-fashioned camera around her neck, and unusually, she didn’t have anything to lean on: instead, she was standing up straight. She looked glum. “Sorry,” she said, shrugging. “Out of cash.”

Akko sighed. “Thanks anyway.”
Char turned to leave. Officer Widdecombe followed her out.

Akko and Diana were alone.

“This is the last of them, sir!” Officer Widdecombe said, taking her bundle of wands and dropping them on Mayor Bloomington’s desk.

“Ah ah ah,” he said, leaning forward with a smile. “Into the collecting basin, if you don’t mind.”

Were she not on duty, she might have sighed, but it was a reasonable enough request. She walked over and placed them in the… it took some effort to keep calling it a collecting basin instead of what it really was.

“Thank you,” he said, wiggling somewhat in his seat.

“May I sit down!”

“Only if you stop shouting.”

That was quite okay with Officer Widdecombe. As she sat down, she felt the pressure come off her abused feet, and felt their protests in turn. The muscles and joints all up and down her leg joined in common cause, and she suppressed the urge to groan.

“But not for too long,” he added. “In fact, I’m going to want you to—”

“Sir, I actually have a request.”

Mayor Bloomington frowned. “What sort of request?”

“I…” She shook herself. “Sir! Permission to visit my idiot little sister in the hospital!”

“Hmm.” Mayor Bloomington steepled his fingers. “Denied. We need you far too much on the streets.”

“About that.” She glanced to either side. “Your security guards.”

The two huge men didn’t seem to have moved since the last time Officer Widdecombe had arrived. It was truly remarkable—as if they had been 3D printed from a mold named ‘generic menacing large man’, and set in a nondescript pose with their hands held in front of them, and just left there.

“Might I be allowed to deputize them for a short period of time? So I can visit my sister while they patrol? Or at least….” Her stomach rumbled mightily, and she winced despite herself. “I could get a bagel? Or even get some paperwork done? Or a change of clothes.” She gestured down at her uniform, which had half-dried in an uncomfortable way, so that it chafed. “I haven’t had any time for—”

Mayor Bloomington laughed in a way that, if not for context, Officer Widdecombe would have called jolly. “Oh, but they’re needed here too. I have private work to do,” he explained, smiling widely. “Involving these wands. It’s vitally important that I am not interrupted during that work, so they will serve to enforce that. So, no, they must stay here.”

His smile widened even further. “Now off you go, Officer Widdecombe. You’ve got important work out there, too! Keep bringing in wands!”

“Yes sir,” Janine said, automatically. She stood, saluted, and left, shutting the door behind herself.
And then stood outside the door. Keep bringing in wands, he’d said. Not Keep the town safe, not Stop them from using magic, but….

She shook herself, and was on her way. It was surely nothing, and her fatigue had to be causing her to fixate on odd things. After all, Mayor Bloomington was a great man.

Then a voice interrupted her train of thought. “Excuse me,” the voice said, “how do I post bail?”

It had been about ten minutes. Akko was, of course, going insane.

“I bet,” she said, thinking out loud, “if I took some of this hay, and I jimmed it into the lock, I could—” She shoved her arm through the bars, and reached for the lock, hay already in hand, teeth gritted, grunting noisily. “Pick—our way—outta here! Gah—frickin—come on, you—” She twisted and turned, but—

“Don’t.”

Akko looked round, arm contorted. Diana hadn’t spoke for ten minutes, and this was the word she chose to come back on? “What do you mean, don’t?” Akko stepped toward her. “You want me to do nothing? Are you giving up again?”

Diana opened her eye. Her gaze was steel. Akko gulped.

“I am not giving up,” Diana said. “I am not in the general vicinity of giving up, and I urge you not—” she emphasized the T a little more than necessary: not-tuh “—to get the wrong impression.” She sighed. “But no, you can’t pick iron locks with hay. Sit with me.”

Akko pulled her arm out and harrumphed onto the bench. Diana closed her eyes again. “So now what,” Akko said. “If we’re not giving up, and we’re not doing anything….”

“We’re waiting.” Diana sucked in a breath through her nose, out through her mouth.

“For what?”

“Breathe. We’ll know when we find it. Or when it finds us.” Another deep breath from Diana, which Akko tried to imitate. “Sometimes, the best thing you can do is wait.”

So Akko took deep breaths, and budged up against Diana, and waited. Patience was a virtue, after all. Fourth Word. She tried not to grit her teeth.

“Hey,” she said. At least a minute later, to her credit. “Hey, Diana?”

“Yes, Akko?”

Akko sidled a little closer on the bench, feeling Diana’s body heat on her own. “Do you remember our first kiss?”

Diana frowned, and cracked an eyelid open.

“It was kind of dimly lit… we were sitting on a bench a lot like this one….”

“Akko,” Diana said, opening her other eye and turning to face her, “we haven’t yet had our first—”

“In a jail cell,” Akko said, leaning closer, “a lot like this one….” And she leaned closer still, and puckered up—
And then faceplanted onto the bench as Diana stood abruptly. “No, Akko! Level Three! Do I have to keep reminding you,” she said, throwing out a hand, “what Level Three means?”

Akko shoved herself upright, removing her face from the bench. “It means when other people are around! It’s just us right now! That’s Level One!”

“Level Three means all public places! I’m not some sort of—some sort of exhibitionist, Akko!” Diana groaned loudly. “Why can’t you respect that?”

“Because what kind of girlfriends haven’t even kissed yet, Diana? How is that ‘proper’?” Akko raised her hands for air quotes. “How does that make sense?”

Diana turned away, arms crossed. “I can’t believe we’re having this discussion while wrongfully imprisoned. Do you really believe this is the time?”

“Come on, what else are we doing? Just waiting?” Akko stood too. “You know how I feel, I know how you feel, so what are we waiting for?”

Diana didn’t reply, and with how she was looking away, Akko didn’t even know if she’d reacted facially. “Diana,” Akko said, way quieter, “what are we waiting for? Is it… am I doing something wrong? Is it something to do with me?”

It took a few seconds longer before Diana finally sighed. “Of course it’s to do with you, Akko.”

Akko flinched back, sucking in breath. It was like being slapped in the face.

“No, not—oh, Beatrice, I said that horribly.” Diana turned around. “It’s because… because you’re the most wonderful person I’ve ever been blessed enough to meet. And the times when we’re together—physically together—” she reached out, picked up Akko’s hand, and held it “—are the times I want to remember as the best of my life. You’re the most exceptional person, Akko, and I never want to think of you as ordinary.”

“So so it’s not because you’re….?” Akko’s lip trembled a bit.

“Atsuko Kagari.” Diana sounded like a scolding teacher, but she was smiling, at least in Akko’s peripheral vision—Akko still stared toward the floor. “You had better not be about to say, ‘embarrassed of you’.”

Akko sighed. “But….” She looked up. “I want you all the time. Not just when other people aren’t around. And I really wanna have that first kiss.” She smiled hopefully.

Diana was smiling too, but not hopefully, exactly. “And when we do, I want to make it perfect. A perfect romantic memory. This….?” She sat down on the bench again, still holding Akko’s hand. “This is not the time or place.”

“I dunno…” Akko winked. “Two brave young women, wrongfully imprisoned for going against the man? That’s pretty romantic. Like Zorro or something. That guy got arrested a bunch, right?”

Diana snorted. “Or, to reframe: two witches in a cell that probably hasn’t seen a mop since the turn of the twentieth century.” She sniffed and made a disgusted face, but then closed her eyes and became a picture of calm.

“All right, fiiiiiiiiime.” Akko sighed. “Since no one’s here, can we at least stay at Level Two?” She gave Diana’s hand a little squeeze.
Diana didn’t respond with words, but she gave a little squeeze back.

As it turned out, Akko didn’t even wait too horribly long after that. The familiar, strident voice came only a few minutes later. “Inmates! Your bail is here!”

Akko couldn’t help but notice that, although Officer Widdecombe sounded just as loud and energetic as before, the tone of triumph was missing. And that made Akko smile. “You were right!” she said, turning to Diana beside her.

“I was,” Diana said, not opening her eyes.

“Who do you think bailed us out?”

“I choose not to speculate on such things without evidence.” A few seconds passed. “But it was probably Lotte.”

“That makes sense, but she wasn’t in town today….” Akko pushed herself up, walking closer to the bars, trying to see the silhouette. “How would she know we were here?”

Diana hmmed. “Barbara?”

Officer Widdecombe’s silhouette approached fast, followed by Officer Widdecombe herself. She retrieved the keys, unlocked the door, and stepped back with a glower on her face. However, the other silhouette—or silhouettes, who knew at this point—was taking its sweet time. “Any moment you like!” Officer Widdecombe yelled, turning to face the stairs.

Akko glowered at her in turn. “Don’t you have some grade schoolers to threaten somewhere?”

Officer Widdecombe’s hand went for her baton. Akko stood her ground and kept eye contact; if insulting stupid dumb cops was illegal, she’d happily stay in the clink. Finally, with a little snarl, Officer Widdecombe said, “Your wands are at City Hall. You may not retrieve them before your trial, due to the nature of your offenses.” And she said it, too, instead of shouting. She turned around and jogged up the stairs.

Akko walked out the open door, stretching and smiling—not like she hadn’t had room to stretch inside the cell, but it still felt different. Diana joined her a few seconds later, but they didn’t head out; they kept waiting for the silhouette that was, only now, coming into view. And it didn’t look like anyone Akko knew, either.

A voice came down the stairs. “Freaking….” A breath was sucked in, and then the voice continued. “Stairs.”

“Would you like me to carry you?” said a second voice. This one sounded vaguely Spanish-accented.

“I’ve got this!” the first voice insisted. The silhouette started moving faster, pants coming from it, and at length a girl came into view. Her hair was short and black, her left arm was in a cast, and her free hand was gripping the railing across her body. Her face was pale red with exertion, at least as far as Akko could see in the low light.

Two other witches followed behind her; one looked remarkably muscular and was carrying some sort of scooter, and the other’s giant glasses distorted her eyes hugely.

Akko’s eyes widened, and she jumped a little. “I know who you are! You’re Alice… Ganymede?
“Galvanize?” She frowned.

“Gainesbury.” Alice reached the bottom of the stairs at last and sucked in a breath. The muscular witch hurried down and put down the scooter, which Alice quickly accepted, putting her arm on the handlebar and knee on its seatpad-thingie. “Thanks, Ximmie. This is Ximena, by the way,” she said, and then gestured to her other side, “and that’s Rain. They’re my favorite people right now.”

“Right, Alice Gainesbury.” Akko frowned. “You’re the one who used to be friends with—”

“Can I have your autograph?”

Akko blinked a few times, as Alice lifted a large book from a cubby on the side of her scooter and held it toward Akko. This was new.

Rain squinted, though with how much her glasses magnified her eyes, that only reduced them to normal size. “You two dudes look stressed. I bet I could help with that.” She reached into her robes and pulled out, for some reason, a needle.

Ximena glared down at her. “Rain. Stop offering to poke everyone we meet full of holes.”

“It’d help. You know it. S’all I’m sayin’, dude.”

“There are other issues in play here! Like, for instance, bodily autonomy!”

“Which is why I’m asking. All works out.”

The two glared at each other, but Akko saw the ghosts of smiles on their faces. Then, however, Alice cut in with a short, sharp, “Can it,” and the two stopped bickering. Alice smiled. “She really is trying to help. About that autograph?”

“Uh.” Akko took the book—surprisingly light for its size—and opened it up. There was a page in the middle, one which had the signatures of just about every teacher at the school, as well as an elegant Diana Cavendish in cursive. “I remember now,” Akko said, as Alice handed her a pen to sign with. “You asked Diana to sign it and I was there and you didn’t even notice me.” She pouted.

“Everyone knows Diana Cavendish.”

“Uh….” Akko grinned, or at least showed teeth, and pointed at her face. “Every screen in the world? International sensation?”

Alice glowered. “I was in the hospital that month. Spent most of it unconscious. Look, I recognize you now, so sign it, okay?”

“Uh… oh, okay.” Akko shrugged and signed it with a flourish, just below Diana’s name, then offered the book back. “You’ve got a lot of these.”

“I do, yeah.” Alice took the book back and gave it a… sort of weird look. Akko wasn’t sure what to make of it: somewhere between wistful and resentful? “I’ve been working on it for a while. Since I was about nine, actually.”

When she got sick, Akko’s brain supplied.

“I… always wanted to be a great witch. But something happened to me and I… couldn’t.” She looked away for a moment. “This book was sort of a way to… at least get involved, somehow. A way to at least be near the great witches, as if it would somehow rub off….” She snorted. “Look, I
was nine. I was dumb and… I’d given up, I guess. I’d decided that the rest of my life was gonna go
down the drain, and years of it did. Down the freaking drain.”

The way she said freaking put Akko in mind of another word.

“But now?” Alice looked up again. “Now I’ve met these two.” She reached out with her right arm
and put it around Ximena; a twinge of movement from her cast suggested she was trying to do the
same with her left around Rain’s shoulders, but she winced and grimaced with pain. “Freaking
cast…. They’re the best friends ever. And guess what?”

Her grimace of pain turned up, so that it was a smile—still a smile of pain. “I can go places now. I
can live. I can have a life! And I’ve decided something about that.”

A smile of pain, and something else. She looked… Akko wasn’t sure of the word. Hungry?
Angry? Furious, even?

Alice pulled her arm off Ximena and stepped forward, pushing her scooter until she was right in
Akko’s face. “No one gets to stop me from doing something I want to do. Not ever, ever, ever
again. And I’ll kick and claw and bite to keep the life I’ve just gotten back.”

Her gaze was piercing, and Akko had the right word for it now. Starving. It was like she’d been
starving and had been given a morsel of food, and the beast of hunger inside her had awoken.

Akko laughed nervously. A kid on a mobility scooter with her arm in this cast shouldn’t have been
this unnerving. “So. Um. You… paid us out of jail… because?”

“First of all, not my money.” Alice let out a laugh. “And second? Because that bitch of a
policewoman took my wand.”

She held her hand in a fist. “I wanna see you fix this town. For me. So I can actually fly my broom
and do magic here and stuff.”

Diana stepped forward beside Akko, and her lips were pursed. “For you?” She frowned. “To be
clear. Not for the citizens of this town. I’m not ungrateful by any means,” she added, holding up
her hands as Alice glared at her, “but this seems a little… self-centered.”

“Are you calling me selfish?”

“I wouldn’t—”

“Let me tell you about selfish.” Alice stepped forward. “Selfish is what they call you when they’ve
got everything and you’ve got nothing. When they spend their time pretending like they care, like
they’re trying to help you, and then she walks away and leaves you with nothing! And then you’re
the selfish one when you try to do something for yourself for once? Well, if that’s what she’s
gonna call me, then I’ll be selfish any day of the week!”

Akko bit down on her tongue so hard that she winced—it was all she could do not to mention the
switch from they to she.
“So you know what? Be selfish. Get mad! Kick and claw and bite and scream, and don’t take it anymore!” Alice was yelling right at their faces. “I don’t care what reason you need, but break this stupid law and break it into smithereens!”

Alice took several steps back, panting like a bull—seeing red. The outburst had clearly taken a lot out of her. “And if you can find the time,” she wheezed, “poke that awful policewoman in the eyes, too.”

“Aw, dude, don’t be mean to the cop.” Rain pouted. “She’s probably just sad cuz her sister blew up.”

Diana’s head whipped up. She strode across the room. “Pardon me. What was that about Officer Widdecombe?”

“Yeah, so, like, I’m social? And this morning while those two dudes were….,” Rain pointed vaguely at Ximena, who had taken out a hand gripper in the meantime and was exercising with it, and at the still-furious Alice. “What were you dudes doing? Jogging, or something?”

“Today’s a rest day,” Ximena muttered. “I only jogged once this morning.”

“Yeah, sure. Point is, I was at a bakery. I got chatting with the bakers. Turns out the policewoman’s sister—Lizzie, I think?—was the one who blew up. So that Janine Widdecombe lady miiiiight be unhappy about magic or something, I dunno.”

“I don’t really care about her sobstory. She’s still a dumb bitch.” Alice sucked in a deep breath. She seemed to be sweating, and she confirmed it when she wiped her forehead. “Look, I need to go home, because I’m probably gonna pass out on the street and go into shock, or something. But you two need to do this—for whatever reason you need. Me, or the town, or you.”

Akko nodded slowly. “Huh. I… guess that makes sense. Thanks, Alice!”

“Don’t mention it.” Alice smiled, then panted again. “Okay, I am not making it back up those stairs. Ximmie, I’m really sorry, but—”

Ximena bent down, picked up the scooter with Alice still on it, then jogged up the stairs. “Thanks a million,” she breathed. Then she locked gazes with Akko and Diana one more time. “Raise hell!”

“Bye,” Rain said, following them up, waving back to Akko and Diana as she went.

They were alone in the basement. “She’s nicer than I expected,” Akko said. “Well, okay, maybe not nicer, but…. Is there a word for being friendly without being nice?” She shrugged. “So where do we stand?”

“In the basement of the Blytonbury jail.” Diana ran her fingers through her hair. The time spent against the cell wall had gotten it somewhat into disarray, but she smoothed it out quickly. “We don’t have wands.”

“Or brooms. And Janine said we can’t get our wands back, either.”

“So. No magic. No flight. We’re a little low on resources.”

Akko thought about the autograph book, and she smiled. “I think something else might prove more vital in our crusade.”

A few seconds of silence passed. Diana frowned at her.
“I meant, like, our reputations. Because you said earlier about how your reputation was really helpful, and—” Akko groaned. “I was trying to be clever, okay?”

“I like my camera,” Char said, holding it up and taking some pictures as they walked.

“I’m glad,” Tiff said, smiling. “Now let’s go home.” She pursed her lips. “And obviously get our wands back first. Does… anyone know where City Hall actually is?”

“Let’s find out quickly,” Mani said. The stress on her face, and her increased rate of breath, were still obvious several minutes after leaving the jail. “It’s getting agitated again—I feel like it could happen whenever!”

“It’s not gonna happen,” Tiff said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“This is a really nice camera,” Char said again, a little louder, aiming it at a lamppost.

“But what if it does? You don’t know it won’t!”

“I promise you, it’s not going to—”

“Hey, Tiff, mate?” Char raised a hand from the camera and did a little wave. “Can I ask a favor? I know you paid for the camera and all but I need another one.”

“Um… okay?” Tiff turned to face her. “What is it?”

“Shut the hell up for five goddamn seconds.”

The words were spoken in her usual laconic tone. They worked, too. Tiff felt her lower jaw sagging slightly, but didn’t quite have the wherewithal to bring it back up.

“Thanks,” Char said, probably five seconds later: Tiff was absolutely not counting. “Next favor, uh… stop telling Mani whether she knows what’s going to happen in her body or not. She’s the one who might explode. Pro’lly knows better than you.”

“But—” Tiff brought up and held out her hands in ideological self defense. “I’m not trying to call her stupid or something! I’m trying to reassure her! Why do you think I’m—”

“Mani,” Char said, a little louder still, “scale of one to ten. How reassured do ya feel?”

“Um.” Mani frowned, scrunching up her nose a little. “Three?” Char didn’t respond verbally to that; she just gave Tiff a look.

“Whatever!” Tiff threw her hands in the air. “Whatever, okay? We’re going to City Hall anyway, as soon as we can find where it is, so whatever! As soon as we just—”

“Ten blocks.” Char had her phone out before Tiff knew it, and then she put it away just as quickly. “And then a right. It’s clear across town.”

“All right!” Tiff let out a pant of frustration. “And I guess we should run there too, right?”

Char sighed. “I guess I’ll do what I can.”

“Oh, aren’t you just in the helping spirit.” Tiff set off at a jog with a roll of her eyes. Mani followed her “And if you’re telling me to do something,” Tiff continued, glancing back at the lagging Char, “please don’t cuss at me?”
“You have not heard me curse yet.”

“I’ve heard you use the….” Tiff shuddered. “The C word.”

“So?”

Thank goodness phone books were still a thing. Akko peered at the one she was holding, peered at the number on the house, then smiled, dropped the book, and hopped forward to the doorbell. Ding dong!

A few seconds passed, and then a familiar young girl opened the door. Stella looked up at them, and her face broke into a huge smile. “Miss Akko! Miss Diana! You’re okay!”

“Never better!” Akko said, while Diana beside her gave a little smile and wave. “Is one of your parents home?”

“Um… Dad!” Stella turned her head and yelled as loud as she could. A few more seconds passed, and then a grumpy looking man appeared. That was okay: the others had been grumpy too.

“Hi!” Akko waved. “This is Diana Cavendish, and I’m Atsuko Kagari, but you can call me Akko! Or, you can call us the girls from Starfall.”

His eyes widened a bit in recognition. A crack in the armor of his grumpiness. Akko pressed forward: “Did you know that the new magic suppression law could get your daughter blown up?”

And the crack got a little bigger. Akko moved to the side a bit to let Diana handle the meat of the explanation: she’d probably taken debate classes or something when she was younger, and where Akko was way better at being likable and first impressions, Diana cornered the market on persuasive argument. They’d done this more than a dozen times by now. They’d gotten really good at it.

“So you see,” Diana finished, “it’s about your daughter’s safety, but so much more as well. It’s about giving her the chance to grow up with all the opportunities she deserves to have, as a witch and as a person.”

Stella’s dad nodded. He’d done that with increasing frequency as Diana’s argument had gone on, and now he didn’t look grumpy at all.

“So,” Akko said, leaning in and smiling up. “Are you with us? The march is at, um….” Diana held up her watch for Akko to read, and Akko smiled. “Ten minutes from now!”

“I… yes. I think so.” Stella’s dad blinked a couple times. “Er. How many people do you expect to appear?”

“Ohhh….” Akko put on a big, cheesy grin. “We’ve got a bit of a crowd….”

No, Tiff and her friends hadn’t run all the way to City Hall. Tiff had tried, and Tiff had failed (Char and Mani had not tried). They arrived through the front doors panting with exhaustion.

“It’s messed up,” Char said, “that this is on the other side of town from school.” She looked ready to sprawl on the floor and sleep right there.

“We’re here,” Tiff managed. “It’s okay.” She pushed her hands off her knees, kept herself upright,
and made her way to the receptionist at the desk. “We’re here… for our wands. I’m Tiffany Vandergard, and she’s Charlotte Jones, and—”

“Oh, um, I’m sorry.” The receptionist held up her hand. “I’m not in charge of returning wands. I don’t actually have them down here.”

“What? Then who—” Tiff sucked in another breath. Hopefully her heartbeat would calm down before long.

The receptionist’s raised hand pointed up the stairs. “As far as I know, all wands were given directly to the mayor himself.”

Char looked up from panting. “What, really?”

“That does seem… weird,” Mani said. She’d recovered by now.

Tiff smiled. “I’m sure he just wants to give his most special attention to taking care of them.” A more skeptical voice in her head was saying that that was a load of hooey—what was the point of delegation, anyway?—but she successfully ignored it. “Thank you anyway,” she said, smiling and nodding at the receptionist.

She walked up the stairs. Mani followed right behind her, and Char lurched along in the rear.

A map of the building was affixed to a wall by the stairs, and Tiff followed its instructions, sending her up another flight of stairs to the mayor’s office. She turned the corner, and there was the door—but there were also two huge men with sunglasses and shaved heads standing there. Tiff stopped short.

Mani did not. She walked forward, although she looked like an ant fearing an oncoming boot as she did so. “Excuse me,” she said, “is this the mayor’s office?”

“Yes,” said one of the men.

“This is where the wands are, right?”

“Yes.”

“Can I….” Mani tapped her index fingers against each other. “Go and get mine?”

“No.”

Mani took a step back. “Um. I need it?”

“Mayor says no one comes in.” The voice may as well have come from a robot. “He has important business with the wands.”

“No, you don’t understand. I really—” Mani shivered “—really need it.”

“Mayor says no one comes in.”

“Listen, please—!”

“Mates?”

Tiff turned around. Char was finally rounding the corner. “I think something’s wrong with my camera.”
Tiff squinted. “Nothing’s wrong with it, I just bought it—no, hang on, how is that the most relevant thing right now?”

“No, but really.” Char trudged closer and pressed at the button. “Flash isn’t working. Don’t think it’s taking pictures. See?” She got up close to Tiff, held her finger over the shutter button, and almost pushed it down. Her finger was on the button, but not applying any force. And then she winked at Tiff.

Char kept walking, and Tiff turned on the spot to watch her. “Look, Mani, it’s not working. And, uh, you guys—could you take a look? Maybe I’m doing something wrong?” She held up the camera, and the two men leaned in.

Char’s left hand came up like a striking snake, slapping the sunglasses off both men just as her right hand hit the button for real. The flash was working, and moreover, it was working right into their newly exposed eyes. They let out yelps of pain, bringing their hands up to cover their abused eyeballs.

“Go, go, go,” Char muttered. Mani gulped, ran forward, and twisted the doorknob.

“Hey!” Tiff called, running forward to follow her in. “You’re basically breaking and... and....”

The three of them were inside, by the door.

A morbidly obese man who could only be the mayor was on the other side, naked in a bath full of wands. He froze in the middle of scrubbing some of them against his pits.

Tiff’s eyes bulged. On a little table near the bath was a book, and on its spine the book read, ‘ Just Like Magic! All the Secrets to Gaining Immense Mystical Powers—That They Don’t Want You to Know!’

Tiff’s eyes bulged further.

The mayor’s face went blotchy red, like badly mixed paint, and he made to stand up. “No, God,” Tiff blurted out, holding her hands out to block her sight of him, “please be wearing underwear, please be wearing underwear!”

“Security!” he squealed, and Tiff yelped as he waddled out of the bath and toward him, exposing the part of his body by his hips, and—oh, thank heavens, he was wearing tighty-whities.

“Security!” he yelled again, still clutching the wands he’d been using like a weird wooden loofah. “Gary! Perry! Get in here!”

One of those wands had a tag. Mani gasped, and she ran forward. “That’s mine! Imani bint Abdallah al Kairoani! That’s my wand!”

She grabbed at the bundle that the mayor was holding. He gasped, and pulled back. “How dare you! I need these!”

“It’s my wand! It belongs to me!”

“You are interrupting official mayoral business—”

A flash of light filled the room. Tiff, the mayor, and Mani looked at Char, who was holding the camera up. “I love this camera,” she said, a slight smile on her face.

The mayor’s face went fully red. “Securityyyyyyyyyyyyy!”
And they finally came in, tear tracks running down from their eyes. Their sunglasses were back on, and just now, Tiff got a sense of exactly how large they were. Each one, on his own, looked to match the combined bodyweight of Tiff and her friends.

“Get rid of that,” the mayor yelled, pointing a quivering finger at the camera, “and get them out of my sight!”

One of the men—Tiff decided to mentally label him as Gary—reached forward and grabbed Mani around the midsection, pulling her away from the mayor. She yelped as her hand lost purchase on the wands. Perry, meanwhile, reached down and yanked Char’s camera from her hand, then dropped it on the floor. He raised his leg and—

*Stomp.* It abruptly stopped being a camera and started being a twisted pile of metal and glass scraps. Char looked up at Perry, a quiet angry look in her eyes. “I *loved* that camera.”

Tiff felt her face going red and hot and blotchy. “You,” she hissed, and stepped forward. “How dare you? You—you’re supposed to be keeping the town safe, and you’re just doing *this*? You call yourself the MAYOR?”

She tried to step forward again, but then there was a huge hand on her shoulder—either Gary’s or Perry’s, and she wasn’t sure which. It dragged her back. “I’m gonna tell people about this!” she yelled. “I’m gonna tell them what you did!”

The mayor, who had started putting on a bathrobe once Mani had let go of the wands, smirked. “And who will they believe, little girl? You, or the Mayor of Blytonbury?” He laughed. “I’ve got a reputation. Security, see them to the front door.” He tugged at the collar of his bathrobe as if wearing a suit.

Gary and Perry shoved them through the door of the mayor’s office, slamming it behind themselves. One of them, quite possibly Gary, had a hand on both Tiff and Mani, while the other was pushing a sullen Char. “I *loved* that camera.”

Tiff’s mind was shortcircuiting. “But—he’s the mayor!” Going through the same loops over and over again like a broken record.

“Yup,” Char said. “And he broke my camera.”

“He’s the mayor!”

“Yup.” Char grumbled. “And the picture’s gone too.”

“But he’s not supposed to do that! He’s the mayor!”

They came to the first set of stairs, and Tiff and Mani hurried down them, because the alternative might have been getting shoved down the flight. “He sure is,” Char said. “And now there’s no evidence against him, because I definitely didn’t take other pictures.”

“How dare he!” Tiff yelled. “How dare he do that!”

“I said,” Char repeated, a little louder, “there’s no evidence against him, because I *definitely* didn’t take—”

“I’m gonna die!” Mani wailed.

“Mates, you are *not* hearing what I’m saying here….” Char frowned. “Do you hear something?”
Tiff, Mani, and Char stopped. So did the security guards, even. She did hear something, now that they’d approached the second set of stairs. And unless her ears were deceiving her, it sounded an awful lot like chanting.
“We will not give up the fight!” Akko chanted in a musical cadence.

“We will not give up the fight!” the crowd echoed behind her.

“Give us back our wands tonight!”

“Give us back our wands tonight!”

Akko had no idea how good she was at counting crowds: she’d never had to do it before, and she’d never gotten tested on it. Were there tests for that? In any case, she felt pretty confident in giving an estimation of hundreds. Hundreds of people echoing her words, marching behind her, through the doors of City Hall. It felt… powerful.

Best not to let it go to her head.

She and Diana marched at the front. Akko punched her fist in the air to match the beat of the chant, and Diana’s strides were less ebullient but no less purposeful. Akko could tell this sort of shouting wasn’t exactly her cup of tea, but she was pushing through it.

Up the stairs they went, past the shocked-looking receptionist. They took a right, and—oh, this had to be a joke. “Hi, Tiff!” Akko said, waving to her. “This is getting weird. We will not give up the fight!”

The Tiff in question was being manhandled, along with her friends, by a pair of security guards. The guards looked up with what was probably shock—it was difficult to tell, they weren’t super emotive—as Akko’s protest approached without breaking stride, like floodwaters flowing along the hallway and rising up the stairs.

The two of them let go of their quarries, and Tiff and her friends joined the mob. Or got absorbed by it, anyway. There weren’t a lot of options. “What do you want?” one of the men said, backing up.

“I’m here to see the mayor.”

“You can’t—” he started to say.

“Oh, please tell me I’m not allowed.” Akko bared her teeth. “Please, tell me, ‘you and what army?’”

The crowd had kept up the chant (“We will not give up the fight—give us back our wands tonight!”) as she’d been conversing. The security guards looked past her, and gulped, and kept retreating up the second flight of stairs.

“What’s going on?” Mani yelped.

“Nonviolent protest!” Akko beamed at her. “Come on, join in, it’s a blast!”

“A blast is exactly what I’m worried about!”
“Well, so are we! All the more reason to join in!”

The security guards reached the doors to what had to be the mayor’s office. They glanced over their shoulders, then opened the door to the officer, ran in, and tried to shut it. Akko ran in and thrust her arm through before they could, even though—“Ow!”, she yelped—it really hurt.

The crowd reached them only a second later, and Akko shoved the door open. “Mayor Bloomington!” she yelled. “We need to talk to you right now!”

The mayor sat behind his desk. His formal clothes looked like they had been thrown on in a hurry, and the security guards had taken flanking positions. “What is the meaning of this?” he yelled. “How dare you intrude upon me at this critical time!

One other thing: there was a giant old-fashioned bathtub behind him, filled with wands. It looked like it had been dragged from the corner of the room. It didn’t take a genius to figure that one out. “Were you… were you bathing in those?”

“What?” Mayor Bloomington’s voice squeaked a bit as he said it. He tugged on his collar and said, in a voice that was clearly trying desperately to be more normal, “Of course not. Preposterous.”

“It looks like you were,” Diana said, her voice as cold as Akko’s was hot.

“Circumstantial evidence!” He made a little harrumph noise, to boot. “You can’t prove anything! It’s just a collecting basin.”

“Yeah… nah.”

This voice was quiet, and yawning, and it came from Char. She’d been swept up at the front of the mob, and now she turned around to look at em. “Mates, you’re gonna love this. Go on Twitter, look up hashtag #BloomingtonBath. One word.”

“Er, why?” Akko said.

“Oh, just that you’ll see this.” She pulled out her phone, unlocked it, and showed the screen to Akko. It had a couple of pictures on it, which Char swiped through: the half-naked mayor in the bath, scrubbing himself with wands; Bloomington still in the bath, eyes bulging as he looked at someone out of shot; and, finally, the mayor wrestling for a wand with Mani.

Murmurs arose in the crowd behind Akko. It seemed like they were seeing the pictures too. Diana’s hand was over her mouth, and Akko recognized it as Dianese for “I would be vomiting if it wasn’t impolite”.

“What?” the mayor exclaimed. “I had that picture destroyed!”

Char smirked, just a bit. “Yeah, it looked that way. But I took some pics with my phone before the flashy one with the camera. Close-up magic—all about misdirection.” She turned toward Tiff and snorted, then held her phone out to take yet another photo. “See, Tiff, you were right—I could take pictures with my phone.”

The mayor sputtered. The murmurs in the crowd grew, and they seemed to be approaching an uproar.

“Enough!” Diana strode forward and slammed her hand on the desk, staring the mayor down. “This ridiculous and unethical law of yours ends now. The people of Blytonbury demand it. We demand it!”
Bloomington stared up at her, his face blotched with rage. Before he could say anything, though—

“Excuse me!”

Oh, thank goodness! Akko had been worried she wouldn’t show. She turned around and watched as a disturbance in the crowd grew closer and closer, marked by a police hat poking above the throng, until Janine Widdecombe finally burst from the mass, truncheon at hand. She looked exhausted, miserable, and like she still hadn’t changed clothes since her spill in the creek.

Akko waved. “Hi, Janine! Glad you could make it!” And she meant it, too.

Janine stiffened. “How did you—” She shook herself a little, just enough for it to be visible. “While on duty! My name! Is Officer Widdecombe—”

“Your name is Janine,” Diana interjected. She turned around from the desk and stared Janine in the eyes. “Your sister’s name is Elizabeth. And you’re enforcing a policy that will kill her.”

Janine took another step forward. “What on Earth are you talking about.”

Diana jabbed her finger at the Mayor, over her shoulder. “Did he tell you your sister had been misusing magic? She wasn’t using it at all. And because she wasn’t, the magic accumulated inside her body, until it couldn’t be contained any longer. Until it hurt her.”

“You’re lying!” Janine stepped forward.

“Where was her wand?”

“What?”

Diana narrowed her eyes. “You think she was misusing magic? Then where did she get a wand? Surely an attentive older sister like you would have noticed if she’d had one.”

“I—but—”

“The mayor’s a big fat liar,” Akko said, stepping up too. “He just lied about what happened and made up this stupid ban so he could—so he could do this!” She grabbed Char’s phone and held it up to Janine, showing her the pictures. Janine recoiled. “So what are you gonna do?”

“I—” Janine looked around. She stood between the people on one side, and Mayor Bloomington’s desk on the other. “I am an officer of the law, and no matter my personal feelings on the matter—”

“Is that Janine saying that, or Officer Widdecombe?”

Janine’s eyes darted, and she didn’t move.

The mayor snorted, and he looked liable to let off steam at any moment. “Even you betray me?” he yelled, pointing a quivering finger at Janine. “All right, I’ve heard far more than enough of this! Gary! Perry!”

The two security guards looked at him expectantly. “Escort these people from my building! Be as impolite as you see fit!”

They nodded, and walked around the desk toward the protestors, and—

Clutched at their stomachs, and collapsed, after the sounds of two short impacts. Janine stood before them, holding her truncheon in a quivering hand. “I trusted you,” she said, in a quivering
voice. “I thought you were trying to help.”

“How—how dare you!” the mayor yelled, but the fear in his voice outstripped its anger. “You—you won’t get away with—”

Janine advanced upon him and smashed her truncheon into his desk, cracking it down the middle. Mayor Bloomington yelped and recoiled in his chair, which overbalanced. He fell backward—

His head cracked on the rim of the bathtub, and he collapsed to the floor. The crowd cheered.

“Oh my gosh, is he okay?” Akko ran forward and vaulted the desk, and Diana took the slightly longer route around it. She knelt, hand on his neck, and then nodded up at Akko. Akko felt her shoulders relax. “Whew. Actually, no. Woo! We did it!”

She stood up and hugged Diana, and the crowd cheered even harder. Diana pushed her away. Akko pouted. “Okay, I know this isn’t a Level Two situation, but it’s a special occasion—”

“It’s not that!” Diana’s eyes looked suddenly very worried, and Akko found herself shifting out of celebration mode before she’d even fully entered it. “I’ve just realized something horrible,” Diana said, and she turned to face Janine. “Officer Janine. How many days ago did Elizabeth Widdecombe have her accident?”

Janine was still shaking, looking down at the desk she’d shattered. Diana circled the table and rested a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll repeat,” she said. “When did your sister have her accident?”

“Uh—three days ago.”

“And how long before that did she start acting like something was wrong?”

“Three…” Janine’s eyes widened, and she let out a little gasp. “Three days.”

The room got quiet. Even the cheering stopped.

“We don’t have much time,” Diana said. She re-circled the desk, reached down, and grabbed three wands; one she tossed to Akko. “Everyone!” This was directed at the crowd. “Form into two orderly lines to retrieve your wands! Leave room in the middle for people to travel! Quickly!”

The crowd obeyed. “Come on, Janine,” she said, striding across the room. “And you, Akko. And you, Imani.”

“Wh—me?” Mani barely managed to catch her wand as Diana tossed it to her, and the four left the room at a quick walk. “Why?”

“I’ll explain. Officer Janine, lead the way to the roof as quickly as you can. Answer my questions as you walk.”

“Wait, hang on!” Akko found herself both at the back of their little group, and metaphorically in the rear when it came to understanding what was going on. “You’re not saying she’s going to blow up again, are you?”

Diana gave her a single look, just enough to affirm. Then her attention was back on Janine. “I need information from you. Does this building contain any witch’s brooms?”

“Er, yes—the mayor collected some, though I never knew what he did with them. Historical artifacts, I guess? Maybe I’m glad I didn’t—”
“Veni,” Diana said, holding her wand up. “And since this is city hall, it contains architectural plans for the buildings in town?”

“Yes, of course—”

“Veni.”

They came to a door that looked less ornate, more… janitorial. Basically a maintenance shaft, judging by the sign next to it that promised roof access. Janine pulled out some keys and got to work unlocking it. “Akko, Imani,” Diana said without looking at them, “duck.”

“What do you mean—” Mani started to say, but Akko grabbed her shoulders and pushed her down, just in time for a broom and a plastic tube to fly through the air where their heads had been.

Diana caught both. “You hold this,” she said, tossing the broom to Mani. “And….” She grabbed the tube, yanked the cap off the end, and unfurled the scroll of paper within. “Ah, yes. One moment.”

She taped the scroll with her wand, and it floated flat and horizontal in the air before her—and then green light burst from it, creating a wireframe three-dimensional model of the hospital, as if built upon the paper. “Where on this map is your sister’s room?”

Janine opened the door. They climbed the stairs two at a time. “Here!” Janine said, pointing at a room that looked to be on the fifth floor. “Listen—if we need to get to the hospital, I can use Mum’s car—”

“Not fast enough,” Diana said. “But we’ve got someone who’s very fast on a broom.”

Mani blanched. “Oh, you’re not saying—”

They burst out onto the roof. The whole of Blytonbury, in all its fall splendor, was laid out before them: quaint roofs and orange leaves. And there was exactly no time to appreciate any of it: Akko saw a distant building that looked shinier and newer than the others, and it matched the wireframe besides. "There!" she yelled, pointing.

“Get on,” Diana said. Mani got on her broom, trembling. Meanwhile, Diana waved her wand in front of herself, and a grid—a spreadsheet, in fact—appeared in the air in front of her, with numbers flashing and calculating within it. “Hold still,” she continued, waving her wand over Mani and her broom.

Mani gulped. “What are you doing?”

“Many things. In order…. Diana mumbled to herself as the spreadsheet continued to calculate. “Estimating your airspeed based on temperature, your magic potential, and the grade of the broom; adjusting your broom’s angle to line up with the hospital room—”

Mani’s broom rotated without her moving it, and she made an eep! noise.

“—casting the spell that will cause you to lose your grip on the broom once you reach the hospital, because I know you have some difficulty with control; and casting the spell that will keep you safe from shards of broken glass.”

“Safe from what?”

“Shards of broken glass. You see, they can be rather sharp—”
“You want me to fly through a window? I can’t do that!”

Akko walked forward and tapped her on the shoulder. “Hey,” she said, and Mani looked at her.
“You’re gonna do great. Remember, a believing heart is your magic, and I—” Akko patted her on
the shoulder again “—believe in you. You can do this, okay?”

Mani gulped. “I—well….” She gritted her teeth, and yelled, “You know what? Can I just go before
I have a panic attack!” She looked ready.

“Done,” Diana said, as the spreadsheet collapsed in front of her. “Go!”

Mani yelled, “Tia freyre!”, kicked forward, and was off like a shot.

Smash went the windowglass, and it scattered in shards across the floor of the hospital room.
Diana had not been joking: Mani didn’t feel anything more than a gentle patter against her skin, as
if caught in a brief rainfall. The broom flew out of her hand and slammed against the opposite wall,
and Mani skidded across the tile floor with the glass. What must have been a sterile room now
looked a bit like a tornado had been through.

The room’s sole occupant, a girl who looked quite like a younger version of Officer Widdecombe
—good, it would be really awkward if Mani had broken the window of the wrong room—jolted up
in surprise. “It’s okay,” Mani said, standing and holding her hands up. “You probably have no idea
what’s going on, but I’m here to help.”

“Get away from me!”

“It’s okay, I’m not going to hurt you!” Mani winced. “I mean, I can see why you think I might, but
—”

“No, I’m gonna hurt you!”

The girl—her name was Lizzie, right?—was trembling as if feverish. There were devices attached
to her, including a blood pressure cuff and others whose names Mani did not know, and at the end
of those devices were machines, and those machines were beeping like mad. Her heart rate, at the
very least, was sky high.

Mani stepped forward, and Lizzie pushed herself back in her hospital bed. “Don’t get near me!
There’s something wrong inside me, it hurts things, it hurts people! It’s going to hurt you!”

“It’s okay,” Mani said, stepping forward, and then she bit her tongue, because—

“It’s not okay!”

“No, I shouldn’t have said that. It’s not. But you’re going to be okay. Because you’re like me.”
Mani held up her wand. “You’re a witch, like me. And that thing inside you is magic.”

She walked closer. “And it’s really scary. I get that too. Really scary. And I wish I could just ignore
it and hide and have nothing happen, but….” She was now at Lizzie’s bedside. “Can you stand
up?”

She shook her head. “Okay,” Mani said, and sucked in a breath, and started disconnecting the
various devices keeping Lizzie in bed. Some of them started making harsh whines. “All right, I’ve
got you,” she said, and handed her wand to Lizzie. “Hold this?”
Lizzie held it. Mani scooped Lizzie into her arms and lifted her out of bed. “Okay, here we go,” she said, hauling herself to the window, careful not to step on any broken glass.

Footsteps from behind her. She glanced round to see a doctor running into the room. “Who are you?” he yelled. “You can’t be—”

“Shut the hell up for five goddamn seconds, and let me save her life!” Mani yelled, and he shut up. She returned her attention to the floor, and managed to avoid the last bits of glass: she didn’t know if she was still invulnerable to cuts, but best not to risk anything. Now Lizzie was at the window. “Ever cast a spell on purpose before?” Mani grunted.

“No,” Lizzie said. “You really think I’m a witch?”

“Trust me. Point the wand out the window, and say these words: Bella vida.”

“Bella vida?”

“Say it,” Mani huffed, “like you mean it!”

“Bella vida. Bella vida. Bella vida!”

Fireworks burst from the hospital building.

The town of Blytonbury—already lit in gold by the setting sun—was splashed with bursts of red, blue, green, every color of light. They just kept coming, like it was Bonfire Night.

Akko jumped and whooped and hollered. “She did it! She vented the magic! Your sister’s okay!” She bounded closer to the edge of the building, laughing. “Wow, those are a lot of fireworks! She must have really been close!”

She turned around, smile still on her face, to see Diana smiling—and Janine on her knees. Trembling. Akko’s smile fell away, and she rushed to Janine. “Hey, don’t worry. These are the good kind of explosions. They mean she released her magic in time. She’s safe.”

“So she’s going to be okay?” Janine’s voice shook. “Lizzie’s going to be okay?”

Akko beamed, and held out a hand for Janine to take. “She’s gonna be way more than okay. Lizzie Widdecombe is going to be great.”

Lizzie panted, her arm drooping as the last of the fireworks died away. “It worked,” she said, and Mani noticed she seemed far less agitated now. “It… I feel okay! I really am a witch!”

“Good. Whew.” Mani hurriedly backed up, somehow avoiding any glass on the way, and dropped Lizzie to the floor once outside the foot-cutting zone. She tried to gently lower her to the floor instead, but the girl was surprisingly heavy, or perhaps Mani was just very unmuscular. In any case, Lizzie landed on her feet. “I need that back,” Mani panted, holding out her hand.

Lizzie frowned, but gave back her wand. “Where can I get one?”

“Heh. It’s funny you mention that.” Mani smiled. “I know this girl, and she’s got this program for magical outreach… actually, one second.” She looked up to see the doctor, still standing in the room, still staring at her. “Sorry about the mess,” Mani said. “I’ll just… clean it up.”

She stood, picked up the broom from where it rested on the ground, and started sweeping the glass
into a more manageable pile. It wasn’t working very well—the broom was built for flight, and its room-cleaning abilities were vestigial.

Mani grumbled. What she really needed was a mop.

“I am gonna sleep for a week,” Char grumbled.

Tiff rolled her eyes. “Really?”

“Today felt like it lasted, like, a month. And I wasn’t even there for most of the action.” Char rubbed her back and groaned. “I need to get off my feet.”

Tiff let out something that was either a snort or a chuckle: even she wasn’t sure which. She pointed her wand at Char—and she held it gingerly after the bath it had been in: she’d be scrubbing this wand with lye once she got back to Luna Nova—and said, “Paleis Capama.”

A bubble enclosed Char, lifting her off her feet. “Aww,” Char said, “you’re the best.”

Tiff’s little smile wilted away. “I’m really not.”

“Naw, you’re just saying—”

“I screwed up again.” Tiff clenched her jaw, sucked in a breath. “I make the wrong choices and trust the wrong people and can’t help anyone and I keep getting burned!” She looked up at Char. “I was just trying to do the right thing, just trying to be helpful, and… and as it turns out, I aided and abetted some jerkoff who deserves to be locked in a sanitarium! I keep getting it wrong!”

“Yup.” Char shrugged. “You kinda do.”

“I know, I know, that’s what I just said—”

“But you know what, Tiff? I’m kinda proud of you.”

Tiff stopped walking and turned around. “Why?”

Char smiled beatifically. “‘cuz jerkoff is the closest you’ve ever come to using a bad word.”

Tiff groaned and turned away.

“And ‘cuz… I dunno. It feels like you’re changing. Like you’re learning something, or something. Like every time you mess up, you come a little closer to not messing up like that again. And you came around this time, right?” Char let out a little, satisfied grunt. “You know, you’re not actually half bad, mate.”

“Incoming!” yelled a voice from above.

Tiff flattened herself against the ground on instinct. Mani, riding a broom not calibrated for her, zoomed past faster than Tiff’s eye could follow, and touched down about three blocks away. “I’m okay!”

She didn’t crash or anything, either. Tiff raised her eyebrows, impressed. “She’s over there!” Mani yelled, pointing down the street at Tiff and Char.

“Thanks!” called a second voice from on high. Tiff looked to its source and saw Akko and Diana, riding a single broom. Akko held a bucket in one hand that was packed to overflowing with wands.
She took one, passed it to Diana, and Diana tapped it with her own wand: it glowed and floated down toward Char.

“Ah, that’s where it got to.” Char smiled as it entered her bubble and fell into her hand. She waved up. “Thanks, big sis!”

“No problem, Char!” Akko waved right back, and they zoomed away. Tiff watched as scores of wands rose up from the bucket, wrapped in the same light, and floated down toward the street. Like magical wooden flakes of snow. Akko cheered, getting the attention of the townsfolk below. And now people all around them were raising their hands, catching their wands, cheering, like this was the ending of some Hallmark movie about the meaning of Christmas—except that it somehow didn’t feel cheesy, at least not to Tiff.

“They said this would be faster than getting everyone to City Hall,” Mani said, rushing back toward them, “but they wanted to give yours back personally, Char, because you helped so much!” Her broom was smoking slightly.

“Aw, shucks,” Char said. “I’m touched.” Then she glanced at Tiff and made head-motions toward Mani, and Tiff wanted to smack her for being so unsubtle about it, but….

Tiff closed her eyes for a second, took a breath, and walked toward Mani. “Mani,” she said. “I’m sorry about what I did today. I thought you’d be okay, and I thought it so hard I didn’t even consider you might not be.” She let out a shuddering sigh. “I want to… to stop doing that. I want to start listening instead. So… I’m sorry.”

She looked up, awaiting Mani’s judgment. Mani smiled, moved in, and hugged her. “It’s okay,” she said. “And it means a lot to me that you said it like that.”

Tiff snorted out a little chuckle, or possibly a sob. “You’re sounding like Akko.”

“Maybe I am? She’s infectious.”

With a sigh, Tiff let go. “All right,” she said, “let’s go home.”

She took her broom off her back and got on. Mani raised a hand, and Tiff smiled and let her get on behind. “Tia freyre,” Tiff whispered, and the three of them rose into the air amid the snowfall of wands.

“Now come on,” Char said, “and say a real swear.”

“No, Char.” Tiff pointed herself toward the leyline back to school.

“Come on, I’ll tell you some great ones! I believe in you!”

“No!”

Flores Flours was nearly closed for the day, but there was just enough time to fit three more customers.

Janine took a bite of her bagel, and tears welled in her eyes. “It’s so good,” she mumbled through a mouthful of dough. “And I’m so hungry.”

“So,” Diana said, “whatever happened with Mayor Bloomington after we left City Hall?”

Janine’s eyes narrowed, and she chewed for a few seconds before swallowing. “Well, he’s not the
mayor anymore. He got voted out."

Akko smiled. Janine sounded so much nicer when she wasn’t busy being Officer Widdecombe. Kind of grumpy at the moment, but who could blame her—and it was still a big improvement.

“Hm,” Diana said. “I was under the impression that there was no mayoral election this year.”

“Call it a snap election. Once people found out what he’d done, they… snapped.” Janine snorted bitterly. “I guess anywhere’s a democracy when people are mad enough. And I’m pretty sure Mister Bloomington won’t be in charge of anything for a long time.”

She snorted again, even more bitterly, holding her bagel in one hand as they sat at what she’d told Akko was her favorite bakery. Which also happened to be Akko’s, because the world was funny like that. Karen Flores was busy behind the counter, finishing up their orders, and using a little heating spell Diana had shown her to heat up Akko’s hot chocolate. On the other side of the seating area, Stella and Claire were practicing magic over cups of tea, and little *fwaps* hit Akko’s ears as the teabags kept hitting the ceiling.

The three girls sat at a counter facing the street: Janine on the left, Diana on the right, and Akko in the middle. Newly-minted witches filled the street, running around and sending sparks up and making things float, so that even as the sun went down the sky was filled with light and motion. It was a festival, and Akko wanted to run out and join in, so much that she was twitching—but it had been a really long day. Maybe in a few minutes.

“It’s funny,” Janine said, eyes fixed on the commotion outside. “There’s been a Mayor Bloomington in this town for, I don’t know, a hundred years? It’s practically a hereditary position.”

“Even the oldest traditions can use some updating from time to time,” Diana said, and sipped at her mug of tea. “It’s a shame I had to get an arrest on my record to make the change happen, but life goes on, I suppose.”

“About that.” Janine snorted. “You wanna know something funny about Bloomington? The… jerk … didn’t give me a break all day. Not to grab a bagel, not to go check on Lizzie, and certainly not to process any paperwork. Even paperwork regarding arrests.”

Diana looked up with interest.

“Which means,” Janine continued, “that as far as the official record is concerned, no one got arrested today. And honestly? I don’t feel like correcting the record. It’s... the least I can do.”

She dropped her bagel and held her face in her hands. “God, I’m so stupid. I arrested you two and that other girl, I nearly got Lizzie killed, I feel like such an idiot! This is awful.”

“Hey, it’s not so bad.” Akko patted her shoulder. “Thanks, Karen!” she added, as Karen set down her hot chocolate with a smile.

“It’s very bad,” Janine said into her hands.

“It could be worse. You could be like Mister Bloomington— he probably feels like he’s a genius, and like we’re all dumb.” Akko rolled her eyes. “Honestly, feeling like an idiot is way underappreciated. It’s how I got where I am today!”

Janine snorted. “Sure.”

“So,” Diana said. “If Bloomington is no longer mayor, who is? Was there a deputy mayor?”
Janine snorted. “We’re not a big enough town for *that*. There’s no clear line of succession, it’s just… chaos. No one’s sure what to do.”

“Hmm.” Akko tapped her chin. “I guess they could use someone really smart and motivated in charge. Someone who knows firsthand how important magic is to Blytonbury.” She smiled and clapped Janine on the back.

Janine took her face out of her hands and looked at Akko, eyebrows up into her hairline. “What? How can you *possibly* think I would be a good fit for a job as important as Mayor?”

“It can’t be that hard. Bloomington was doing it!”

“No, but—” Janine grimaced. “*You* of all people are telling me this? I *arrested* you. You should *hate* me!”

“Hate you?” Akko frowned. What a weird thing to say. “I mean, sure. I’m still kind of mad at you. But… I know you. I can hate you, or I can know you, but I can’t do both.” She let out a breath. “And you’d make sure this *never* could happen again, right? Now that you know how much magic matters?”

Janine didn’t answer.

“Look,” Akko said. “I bet there’s plenty of other stuff in this town that needs to be better. And if I’ve learned anything, it’s that you can’t wait for someone else to decide to fix stuff. If you’ve got the power, *you* should be doing it. So hey, run for mayor! What’s the worst thing that could happen, right?”

Janine let out a laugh. “Maybe. And you two?” She looked up at Akko and Diana. “What will you two be doing?”

Akko reached out with her right hand and grabbed Diana in a half hug, pulling their chairs together. Diana didn’t protest the motion—in fact, she put her arm around Akko’s shoulder too. *Level Two achieved."

“I think we’re not done with what we’ve started here,” Diana said. “I think there’s a lot more work left to do.”

“So much work!” Akko said, and beamed. “There’s a lot of witches all around who need our help, and besides that, there’s gotta be a million towns like Blytonbury where people don’t know what to do about magic. We’ve gotta clean things up!”

“With a mop?” Janine smirked a little.

Diana rolled her eyes, but Akko laughed. “You know, the name’s starting to grow on me.”

Mani held a test in her hand.

It said *D*. That was all right: the last one had said *F*. The note from Professor Chariot read, *Good progress so far. Keep up the good work!*

Mani sighed. There was a long way to go.

“Honey!”
Victoria Vandergard, mother of (in her considered opinion) the greatest up-and-coming witch in the world, rushed into Vandergard House’s dining room, the New York Times clutched in one hand. Her husband, Winfred, looked up from his omelette and stood. “What is it, Vicky?”

“Look who it iiiiiiis,” she said, pulling open the paper and laying it out on the table, covering up the nice silverware as she did so. Several pages deep in the paper was a headline: Magic Activists Score Legislative Victory in England.

Next to the headline was a picture, captioned: Atsuko Kagari (left) and Diana Cavendish (right), the leaders of the Magic Outreach Program. Another smaller caption read, Photograph used with permission from Charlotte Jones. The picture seemed to have been taken with a smartphone, and showed the two witches in question in front of a large mob of people, angry and chanting, and filling into some sort of office.

And they weren’t even slightly what Vicky was looking at. “Look who it is!” she cooed, and tapped one corner of the photograph with her finger. “It’s our Falling Star, Freddie!”

Winfred’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?” He grabbed the paper and held it up closer, so he could see Tiff’s surprised face, almost like she didn’t know where she was. “That’s amazing!”

“I know!” Vicky let out another coo. “Ooh, Freddie! Our little Falling Star, already in the news. Making an impact!”

“I’m proud too.” Winfred smiled. “Wow, I recognize those two girls too. From the, um….”

“The broadcast on Starfall, yes.”

“Seems like they’re making an impact too.”

Victoria smiled widely. “Well, I guess we’ll be keeping an eye on Diana Cavendish and Atsuko Kagari.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: this series of chapters was originally gonna be called "Akko-dentally in Politics", but there are some puns too terrible for even me.

Also I'm afraid I'm out of backlog, so the next chapters won't be weekly - at least not for a while.

I hope you've enjoyed so far!
Where in the World is Amanda O'Neill? (1)

Chapter Notes

I know some people can find this sort of thing unpleasant, so warning: the following story arc deals with child abuse.

Also, I didn't intend for this update to take quite so long! But this is some of the most complicated (and heavy) writing I've ever really put myself through, so taking all this time is worth it if I did the story justice. Expect weekly updates for six more weeks, because it's all been written and edited for the next six chapters after this!

(Thanks to hecallsmehischild and Undome Tinwe for prereading this!)

Seven years ago.

“Amanda,” her father said, standing over her as she tried to pretend he didn’t exist, “we can’t keep doing this. Get off the bus.”

Amanda burrowed her way into the corner of the bus’s crummy seat. She could too keep doing this. She’d gotten pretty good at running away after the first two tries, and she’d still be doing this if her parents hadn’t gone and found her and stopped the bus. In the middle of the highway.

“Your mother and I have been worried sick,” her father said in a dull voice. He wasn’t a very good actor.

“My baby!”

Her mother was also not a very good actor, but in the other direction. Amanda stared resolutely out the window, wedging herself into the corner like a doorstop, as the sound of her mom’s heavy footsteps rocked the public bus. “Oh, thank you!” she exclaimed to the bus driver, and Amanda heard kissy noises. “Thank you so much for stopping for my baby!”

And then Amanda felt herself getting swept up in what, to the outside, probably looked like two arms full of maternal affection. “Oh, Amanda Panda, we were so worried!” She felt herself getting yanked out of the bus and couldn’t even find it in herself to struggle. Amanda Panda?

Before long she was off the bus, still in her mother’s arms, and being pulled into one of the two black vans that had parked in front of the bus, and that had forced it to stop in the first place. Each was marked with an ornate orange A. Just like magic, as soon as Amanda was in that van with her mother, the acting stopped and her mother let go. “You are in more trouble than you can even imagine, young lady,” she hissed.

Her father went through the door on the other side, and the black-suited man outside slammed it shut. So now Amanda was stuck in the back, sandwiched between her two least favorite people. “Dear, is there something you’re not getting at home?” her father said. “Are the sitters bad? Do you need new games? A nicer broom?”

“No, David, we can’t keep spoiling her and expecting anything to change,” Amanda mother said in a harsh whisper, as if Amanda wouldn’t be able to hear it. “I’m sorry but this is the third time, and
we need to take *drastic* measures.”

“What do you mean?” And then her father blanched. “You’re not saying—”

“She’s *nine*, David. She’s old enough to visit my mother.”

Amanda kept staring forward.

“Are you sure about this, Cassidy?” Amanda’s father said, as he and Amanda’s mother led Amanda down her house’s massive hallways. Sometimes it felt less like she was living in a house, and more in a video game dungeon.

“Nine years old is a perfect age for a witch to learn her destiny,” Amanda’s mother said, still dragging Amanda along.

“Dear. Sweetie. I’m nearly fifty years old. *I’m* not sure I’m old enough to talk to her.”

“Well, if you can think of a better way to scare her straight, I’m all ears. But you know that Amalthea has been looking forward to this for a long time, and we can’t put it off any longer in any case, so quit griping.”

Amanda didn’t say anything. She just kept looking forward. That had been the plan for a while. It would keep being the plan for a while longer. Keep looking forward to all the time she’d get to spend not with her family, once she was back at school.

That was her secret. The present might suck, but she always had the future.

They reached a set of double doors, ones which Amanda had never seen before in all her exploring. They were very decorated, way bigger than Amanda, and set right at the end of the hallway. If her house *was* a video game dungeon, this was the boss door.

Amanda’s hands went into fists. It was fine. Whatever her grandmother was like, she could deal with it the same way she dealt with her parents: stone wall, don’t give an inch, and just wait until they gave up and let her do her own thing. Even now, as she glanced behind herself, her parents were backing away, leaving her alone.

Then, the first thing she heard was the doors creaking open behind her.

She turned around to see them open, but not enough to see inside. *None* of the doors in this house creaked. Her parents had people for that. Amanda stepped forward, maybe a little faster than she meant to.

The second thing she heard was the music box.

And that was what made her stiffen up. Her parents had gotten her a music box for her seventh birthday. She’d thrown it out a week later. Something about the jerky, disjointed way the doll inside had moved—and more importantly, the jerky way it stopped once the box had wound down. She’d had nightmares about that stupid thing. Nightmares of being the doll, wound up by someone else’s key, only to run out of power and stay frozen forever.

She’d smashed that music box and thrown it out.
The one inside the room was playing the same tune.

Amanda gritted her teeth and stepped inside the room, and that was when she heard the third thing. It was a woman’s voice. Old, weak, and completely calm. “Hello, little Amanda. Aren’t you delighted to finally meet me?”

When she looked forward, Amanda didn’t see what she was expecting. Sure, it was a bedroom, that made sense—but it looked a lot more like a hospital room. All sorts of computers and pumping machines and wires covered the floor, all laid out around a central four-poster bed. In that bed was the woman they all connected to.

She wasn’t just old, she was ancient. She looked ready to crumble into dust, and if any of the wires in her body were pulled out, Amanda wondered whether she just might. But… no. Something about the way she looked at Amanda, something about the way that woman’s gaze dug into Amanda’s skin like hooks, told the truth.

“My name is Amalthea O’Neill,” she said, “and you’ll call me Grandmother.” She smiled with her mouth and nothing else. “I want to see you better. You’ll come closer, now.”

The truth was that Amanda couldn’t stop herself from walking forward, even though no one was grabbing her. The truth was that the wires in Amalthea weren’t pinning her down: they were strands in a spider’s web, and she was the spider at the center. Motionless, waiting.

Amanda walked forward. Her fists were shaking.

The music box was on the nightstand. It looked just like the one she’d smashed; maybe they’d fixed it, maybe they’d just bought another one.

It occurred to Amanda that she’d never told anyone about those nightmares.

“I’ve always loved this song,” Amalthea said, and a hint of a smile moved her face for the first time. “I’ve been listening to it for so long that I remember it perfectly. I know how it starts, and I know how it ends. And I know exactly,” she said, gesturing lethargically—like her hand was being pushed by a breeze—at the dancing figurine atop the box, “how the girl dances, and every move she makes. I see her in my mind, like I see you.” And she closed her eyes.

Amanda didn’t really know what to say to that, so instead she looked around to see what she could see. Other than the machines, the room wasn’t that decorated. The nightstand with the music box and a clock. A dresser, suitably expensive. And on the wall to Amanda’s left, framed like a Da Vinci: a massive manuscript with tiny lettering on it? Amanda squinted, and walked toward it.

It was… a bunch of dates, and names, and numbers that were either positive or negative. Amanda read in her head. July 1, 1943. Dow Jones —

“One thousand, nine hundred sixty two point nine eight points,” said the ancient voice behind her. Amanda whipped around—but the woman’s eyes were closed, and in any case, there was no way she could know which line Amanda was reading. Amalthea smiled. “That’s right, little doll, you’ll come closer again. I know your parents told you what I am. But I want to hear you say it.”

“You’re….” Amanda gulped. Somehow she didn’t know how to give this woman the silent treatment. “They said you’re a fortune teller. You can see the future.”

“I see everything. Now you’ll turn out your pockets, Amanda.”

Amanda didn’t move. At least, she didn’t make herself move, and she didn’t turn out her pockets.
“Are you worried I’ll see your mother’s credit card? The one that expires next month? Or the, let’s see…” Amalthea pursed her lips. Her eyes didn’t open. “One hundred twenty three dollars and forty cents of cash? Or the three snack bars you snuck out of the kitchen yesterday, in preparation? Or the wand and knife you brought.”

Amanda was shivering, and she didn’t know how to stop.

“I told you, doll. I see everything, and I see you. I see that you’re afraid of me, but you don’t need to be—although I don’t mind.” Another smile. “And I see what you will be. Oh yes. You, Amanda, will be… a disappointment.”

She’d smiled before. She’d spent a lot of time smiling. But for the first time, as the music box played, Amalthea O’Neill looked gleeful. “Yes. For exactly seven more years, you’ll be a terrific disappointment to your family. You’ll make them so unhappy with you. But don’t worry, you could never disappoint me.”

Amanda, without realizing it, had gotten too close. Amalthea’s hand reached out and took her shirt and pulled her in. “Because I know everything you’re going to do,” Amalthea whispered, in a tone of utter bliss. “And I know that at the end of those seven years, you’ll come back to your family. And then you’re going to learn to be powerful. You’re going to be like me.”

Amanda’s breathing was coming too fast. The sound of the music box was ringing in her ears, even as it slowed down.

And then Amalthea let her go, and raised a finger. “Your father’s outside the door and he’s about to knock. Despite that I told him not to. Once he does, you’re free to go. But I’ll see you again. You may even see me, too.”

The knocks came, just as the music box wound to its halt, and the dancer froze in time.

Amanda turned around and ran through the door. Her father was on the other side. She ran right past him. Ran past her mother. Tried not to sob.

The present sucked, but she’d always had the future. But now….

Seven years. Then… you’re going to be like me.

She bit down, feeling wetness in her eyes. She kept running until she reached her room, and she sank into a corner, and finally her shoulders shook and she let out quiet sobs. Not loud, because loud sobs are for calling for help.

Amanda saw them with her eyes closed tight. Her parents, grabbing her, and her grandmother behind them—and wires reaching out from her grandmother, wrapping around her parents, moving to wrap around her.

She grit her teeth so hard that they ached, and her fingernails stabbed into her palm.

I’ll never be like they are. Never.

Present day.
“What do you mean, you can’t find her?” Akko yelled. Then she frowned. “Actually, you probably mean that you can’t find her. Dumb question. Sorry.”

The five of them—Akko, Sucy, Lotte, Jasminka, and Constanze—were in the Red Team dorm. Jasminka and Constanze had just burst in, and ruined any chance of Akko staying asleep, so that was great. “Bleurgh,” she said, flumping back onto her bed and pulling her pillow into her face. “Amanda, whyyyy. This was my sleep-in day.”

“We were going to go shopping this morning, and when we woke up she was gone,” Jasminka said. “We’ve looked all morning.”

Akko lifted her pillow off an eye and peered, and she saw Constanze holding up a screen and Jasminka pointing at it. An architectural plan of Luna Nova filled the screen, and most of it was highlighted in red: Jasminka tapped the screen and earned a glare from Constanze for her trouble. “Is it not a touchscreen? Oh, sorry. In any case, we’ve checked all these locations.”

In fact, pretty much all of it was highlighted in red. Maybe a spare classroom here and there, but why would Amanda be holed up in one of those?

“Maybe she actually left Luna Nova,” Sucy said. Akko couldn’t see her very well, and judging by what sounded like some terrified skittering insect that Sucy had trapped in a jar for experimentation, Akko was glad she couldn’t see her very well.

“Sucy, don’t say that!” Lotte said from above Akko. “That would be horrible!”

“Would it?” Sucy shrugged. “She’s always talking about how she wants to do it. I think honesty is an admirable quality in a witch.”

But Constanze was shaking her head firmly, and Jasminka said, “She wouldn’t. Not now, of all times.”

Sucy shrugged again. “Well, you know her better than us.” There came the sound of a potion dripping onto glass, and the skittering from her jar stopped. “Seriously, though. You know her better than us. Why come to us for help?”

The sound of typing pittered through the room. Akko saw that Constanze had a miniature keyboard in her other hand, and letters appeared on the screen: Amanda and Akko think the same way sometimes. They share a certain ‘je ne sais rien’.

“I think the expression is usually je ne sais quoi?” Lotte asked.

Constanze smirked and typed. Not this time.

“All right. You want us to help look? What’s in it for me?”

“I’ll give you sweets?” Jasminka held up a handful of candy.

Akko snorted. “Jasminka, you always give people sweets. That’s like the sun promising to shine. Not that I’m not gonna help,” she added as she sat up, “but…..” Then she frowned. “Hey, are those only the floors of Luna Nova on that building plan thingy?”

Constanze nodded.

“So you only checked the floors?”
Constanze almost nodded. Then frowned. Jasminka, beside her, snapped her fingers. “That’s where she is!”

Sucy snickered. “So much for knowing her better.”

“Amanda, get down from there!” Jasminka yelled from her broom.

Akko threw a pebble up at her from her perch on an adjacent broom. Amanda, reclining atop the tower holding the Sorcerer’s Stone, blew a raspberry back down.

Jasminka cupped her hands around her mouth. “Amanda, seriously, get down! You can’t keep doing this!”

“Eat a dick, Jaz! I can keep doing this as long as I want!”

Constanze flew up on her motorized broom and threw out a weapons-grade glare at Amanda. Akko flinched: knowing Constanze, weapons-grade weapons could come out whenever.

Amanda sighed. “Okay, sorry I said to eat a dick, Jaz. But I’m still not going shopping with you!” she yelled.

“How did you get me to go shopping with you,” Amanda muttered, as they walked off to the Glastonbury thrift shop.

“Because we’re a group of great friends, and walking around and having a great time together is something that great friends can always make time for!” Akko yelled, jumping and throwing out her hands. It was a gorgeous day, possibly one of the last really nice ones of the fall, the kind you’d wanna spend flying around all day just to feel the crisp air on your face.

And somehow Amanda seemed utterly unmoved by it. “Bleh,” she muttered. “Akko, that sounded incredibly lame.”

“What—I’m not lame!”

"Which is what a lame person would say."

"It is not!"

“And because you need new shoes,” Jasminka said, tapping Amanda lightly on the shoulder as she held a bag of chips.

“What? Pssht.” Amanda rolled her eyes. “These babies are still good for another month at least!” The babies in question were so full of holes that they resembled ragged leather crocs: Akko was pretty sure she could see more than half of Amanda’s socks.

“You need new shoes, Amanda,” Jasminka repeated a little quieter.
“Don’t tell me what I need, Jaz—”

Constanze pulled out her wand, waved it, then held it upright. A truly titanic amount of water came out, as if a hydrant’s top had burst, and it formed a large puddle in the street ahead of them. Large enough that a witch couldn’t easily step over it.

Akko, Constanze, and Jasminka—the Decent Shoes Club—walked through the puddle no problem, and Akko even took the time to stomph in it a few times. Then she turned around to see Amanda frowning. “Dick move, Cons,” Amanda said.

“Don’t worry about it!” Akko allowed herself a moment to snicker. “After all, your shoes are fine, right?”

Amanda took several steps back, then sprinted and let out a yell, and then vaulted over the puddle. And then slipped as soon as she touched down, and flailed her arms, and sprawled back-first into the puddle with a huge splash.

“I reiterate,” she said, water dripping down her face. “Dick move.” Jasminka reached down a hand, and Amanda groaned and let herself get pulled upright. “I just wanted to jump across, all right? This doesn’t prove I need new shoes. I decide when I need them.”

“I think your shoes have made up their minds.” Akko giggled. “And I think you know you need to change too, deep down in your sole.”

“Booooooooooo.” Amanda stuck out her tongue, and Constanze punched Akko in the hip. “Well, why are you here anyway, Akko?” Amanda said. Then she shivered a little, as the ever-smiling Jasminka walked behind her and held out her wand: a little heat haze shimmer billowed out from the tip and into Amanda’s soaked back. “That’s nice, Jaz, thanks.”

“Well,” Akko said, “I’ve got a bit of a shopping list.”

They turned the corner and found themselves right outside Glastonbury’s thrift shop, named Glastonbury Thrift: it might have been low on imagination, but it was also low on prices. And right now, Akko needed low prices. “Excuse me!” she called out, entering with her hand up to flag down a teenage attendant.

He walked over to her. “Yes?”

“Hi, I need, uh….” She pulled a notebook from her pocket and consulted it. “About thirty of these,” she said, showing him the notebook and running her finger down a line of goods. “You know: witch hats, witch robes, witch belts, witch wands. Witch part of the store are those in?”

“Jeez, Akko, what are those for?” Amanda muttered, leaning over her shoulder. She didn’t seem to be dripping anymore, thanks to Jasminka’s spell.

“School supplies!”

“Pssht, lame.”

Akko growled a bit, but the teen was beckoning her over. “They’re over in the back, I think,” he said.

Akko, Jasminka, and Amanda walked to the back with him: Constanze went in another direction, presumably to find some old electronics. “Who are you buying them for?” Jasminka asked,
finishing her bag of chips and pulling out another without skipping a beat.

“All the MOP kids! Well, some of them are adults, but yeah. We’ve got so many new witches in the MOP, and they need stuff! So it’s up to me to make sure they’re properly outfitted for magical education before our next meeting. They need wands, robes, brooms, maybe some bookbags—”

“See, this is exactly what I’m talking about!” Amanda groaned and smacked the wall, right between some shelves of bags. “You used to be cool, Akko! You know, spontaneous and junk! And now it’s all education this and work that and blah blah schedule. It’s like having another Diana!”

“What?” Akko frowned mightily up at her. “First of all, Diana is very cool and having two of her would be awesome. Second of all, did you see me stomp in that puddle? And third of all, there’s nothing lame about learning magic.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. You would say that, since magic’s your destiny or whatever.”

“It literally is!”

“Psst!” Amanda walked a little ahead of Akko. “Destiny’s a made up world for losers who want to sound more important than they are. People just do stuff because they want. No destiny gets a say in my life!”

Akko squinted. “What crawled up your b-hole and died, Amanda? You were up on the roof this morning, you’ve been arguing all day… is something bothering you?”

“Uggggh.” Amanda snorted deeply out her nose, sounding like a restless lion. “Family’s on my case, I guess. They’re always annoying this time of year, and I think this year’s gonna be the worst. Thinking about dropping out again.”

“Oh, that again.” Akko smiled and raised her hand. “But you’re not gonna.”

Amanda smacked her hand down. “Buzz off. How do you know what I’m gonna do?”

“Because I… know you?”

“You don’t know everything about me! Maybe I will this time!”

Akko laughed nervously. This felt kind of like friendly banter, but not quite. It was like an uncanny valley of a conversation, and she wasn’t sure what to say. “I guess… if you don’t wanna come on trips like this, it’s fine. Maybe next weekend we’re doing a thing, you can choose the fun thing we do!”

Amanda just kept stomping forward, her expression stormier than the average hurricane. Akko winced and asked, somewhat against her better judgment, “Do you know what you wanna do?”

“Would people quit asking me what I wanna do?” Amanda yelled.

Akko took a step back, silenced. Jasminka, who’d been right behind Amanda, stopped dead.

Amanda looked around and sighed. “Sorry. Sorry, okay? I’m kinda feeling stressed out. And you’re kinda sounding like my mom and pops. Hell, you’re sounding a bit like my grandmom right now, and I am not in the mood.”

Jasminka grimaced. Akko blinked: she’d never seen Jasminka grimace before. And come to think
of it, she’d never heard Amanda mention any grandparents before either….

“Um,” the teenage attendant said in front of them. “We’re here.”

Akko grunted. Fine. If Amanda wanted to be annoyed over someone Akko’d never even heard of, more power to her. She marched over to a wall covered in racks of witchy clothes.

Behind her, the conversation continued. “Amanda?” Jasminka said, in a voice barely louder than the ruffling from the bag of chips she held. “Candy?”

“Not now, Jaz.” Amanda sighed. “Look, when I said this year’s gonna be the worst? I meant… this is the year. Like, the year. The big day’s coming up.”

“Oh. Oh.” The rustling from the bag stopped. “I lost track of time. Are you….”

“How could I not be worried? You know what she’s like. Even if it doesn’t make sense, like….” She let out a pained grunt, like someone was pulling something out of her skin. “I dunno, okay? I just don’t know.”

Akko resolutely kept focusing on the robes in front of her, or at least she tried really hard.

“Wanna talk about it?” Jasminka asked.

“I…” There was a pause, then Amanda said, “Cons, when did you get here?” Akko glanced back to see Constanze glaring pointedly at her, one arm holding a stack of old Gameboys. And then Akko looked forward again. She wasn’t eavesdropping, she wasn’t.

“Cons,” Amanda said, “go back, okay? Like, I appreciate it and all, but… no, I’m being stupid, okay? Forget I said anything. Dunno why I did say anything.”

Okay, screw not eavesdropping. Akko turned around and saw Constanze with her free hand clenched, and Jasminka looking concerned, and Amanda looking in any other direction than at the two of them. “Amanda, what are you talking about?” Akko asked. “Because that was really cryptic.”

“That was on purpose, Einstein,” Amanda growled. She stood and started walking away in no particular direction.

Akko kept her eyes focused on Amanda. Sure, Amanda’s usual response to stress was to throw a dart at the sliding scale from indignation to rage, and react accordingly, but this felt different. Somehow she looked more hurt than usual. “Amanda,” Akko said, stepping forward, “if something’s wrong, you can—”

“Whoa, check those out!”

Amanda rushed past her and bent down. On a shelf packed with shoes near the floor, at the very end, were a pair of scarlet-red boots that contrasted blatantly with the drab black-or-brown shoes that made up the rest. Stylish, not in a trendy way but in a timeless way, and—as far as Akko could see—they had never been mended, and hadn’t needed it either. Amanda picked them up with a wide grin. “How’d no one snatch these up?”

“Oh, those?” The teenager shrugged. “We can’t get rid of those. Everyone who tries them on thinks they’re super uncomfortable, no matter what their shoe size is.”

“You’re screwing with me.” Amanda immediately kicked off her ratty-looking pair, plopped down
onto the floor, and pulled them on.

Her eyes widened. “Oh. Ohohoho.”

Then her eyelids slackened as if she were getting the world’s best massage. “Oh, these feel awesome,” she said. “What do you mean, super uncomfortable? This is the most comfortable pair of shoes I’ve ever been in! Just what are you trying to pull?” she said, jumping to her feet and advancing on the salesperson.

“I swear, no one has ever liked these.” The salesperson kept blinking, presumably with shock. “We’ve had to drop the price on them, like, three times!”

“Wow, those people are dumb.” Amanda laughed, jumped up, and clicked her heels in the air. “I could really see myself in these!”

She walked three steps to the side, and then vanished into thin air.

Akko stared at the thin air where Amanda had been. So did Jasminka and Constanze.

“Um,” said the salesperson, a few seconds later. “Are any of you paying for those?”

It had been about two days. Amanda O’Neill was still missing.

Chariot would have thought that was enough trouble to deal with, but she’d been wrong before.

“Why do we have to talk to the media,” Croix’s hologram muttered, ducked around a corner with Chariot at the front hall, hiding from a waiting throng of reporters. “I’ve got a lost library in the Western Ghats of India to explore. It’s on the verge of collapse.”

The reporters were snapping pictures, recording summaries, and accosting students on their ways to class. Chariot really wished they wouldn’t do that last one, particularly because one of those students they’d accosted was Constanze, who was giving no answers and looked very stressed from the reporters’ efforts.

Chariot smiled weakly. “Behold, the delights of being the least senior teachers. You get used to it.”

“This is a terrible idea. I'm not a people person, Chariot!”

“Sure you are! You're great at dealing with people!”

“I'm great at manipulating people, which is not the same thing!” Croix groaned. “And, let's be honest, not that great. Most of the time the person in question was Akko. Not that I don't like her,” she added hastily, “but she's got her heart on her sleeve, and really, she's not always the brightest LED in the array.”

Chariot’s mouth contracted, but her eyebrows rose; this could be good. “You do like her? I've hardly seen you interact all year.”

Croix's mouth became a thin, pressed line. “I like her in principle. We're getting off topic.”

“Right.” Chariot took a breath. “Just follow my lead if you need to. They'll probably ask me most
of the questions anyway.”

She took another breath, then one more for the road, and walked out and toward the staircase. A few seconds later, the little whirr-hum of Croix's robodisc drew up beside her, indicating that Croix was following.

The reporters looked at her as she approached, and then rushed toward her. “Miss du Nord!” said a bunch of them at once in out-of-sync concert.

“Professor,” Croix muttered.

“What is Luna Nova Academy doing to locate and recover one of its second year students?” yelled one man, shoving a microphone into her face.

“Is it true she's been gone for two days with no news?” Another microphone jostled for position with the first, followed by—

“Has the O'Neill Group been in contact?”—a third.

Chariot raised her hand, an awkward smile coming to her face. “One at a time, please!”

The first reporter shoved his microphone closer. His accent was American. “Given the lackadaisical response to her disappearance, I must ask: does Luna Nova Academy care about bringing Amanda O'Neill back safe?”

It was the kind of question designed to make the responder flustered. To make them look bad. Chariot kept her face neutral on instinct: she'd dealt with press often enough as an entertainer to know how this worked. “Luna Nova cares about all of its students, and Amanda O'Neill in particular is one of our most exceptional. I assure you, we are already making every effort to find her and bring her home.”

That seemed to do the trick. She suppressed a smile, and pointed to the second reporter who'd spoken. “You there, from CNN.”

“Has there been any news since she vanished two days ago?”

'Vanished' had been literal, according to what Akko had told her—the girl had shown up at her office, heaving breaths, apparently about an hour after the event in question. The school had only said that Amanda had gone missing, but the info must have gotten out somehow… Chariot made a mental note to tell Akko about the importance of discretion. Out loud, she said, “None yet. We have been investigating the magical traces in the area where she vanished, and researching magical items that could cause such a disappearance. We'll release a statement when more thorough investigation is complete.”

She chose not to mention that all magical analysis of the scene had turned up nothing, and that the research had all hit dead ends.

“What resources have the O'Neill Group committed to helping with the investigation?” said the third reporter.

“We haven't been in contact with the O'Neill family,” Chariot said in a neutral tone.

“I didn't say the O'Neill family,” the reporter said, a little louder. Chariot got the impression she'd messed up. “I said the O'Neill Group.”
Chariot frowned. She wished she could have come up with something to say, because it would have forestalled the reporter's next question. “You do know who she is, don't you?” the woman said, stepping forward with a smile in her eyes but not on her face.

Chariot's mouth was opening, ready to spew some boilerplate to give her time to think, and then Croix moved forward. “We have also not been contacted by any of their representatives,” she said, a slight confident smile on her face. “If they wish to come forward with their help they may feel free, but Luna Nova prefers to conduct its magical investigations alone, given our unequaled trove of expertise with the discipline.”

Chariot took a grateful step back, letting Croix take the lead. No matter what she told herself or Chariot, she did have a talent for this that experience hadn't quite granted Chariot. It was one thing to perform before a crowd of admirers, but quite another to impress your adversaries.

She frowned. Croix's hand, held behind her back, was... well, Chariot supposed that she had to be typing frantically on an invisible keyboard, because she could think of no other explanation for the twitching of her fingers. A few seconds later, a little holographic display popped up in front of that hand, visible to Chariot and not to the reporters. The heading at the top said, O'Neill Group, and it was followed by an article.

Chariot read the text in the corner of her eye, and tried not to let her astonishment show.

“So this is what a media circus looks like?” Akko said, watching from the edge of the hall with Diana. “Was I wrong for expecting, like, elephants?”

Constanze, who had fled the media as soon as Chariot and Croix had arrived, gave her a flat look, a sort of burned through both the brain cells on that one, did ya? look. She sat on the floor and tinkered with a sturdy metal box, next to Jasminka, who was plowing through bags of chips with unusual speed even by her standards.

“All right, dumb question, okay,” Akko said, looking back at Constanze. “It's just weird, is all. It's not the first time she's disappeared from school, and no one's ever shown up before!”

“It may be the first time she's done it so literally,” Diana said from next to her. “Or for so long.”

“Still, though.” Out of consideration for the number of cameras around, Akko didn't have Diana's hand in her own, but her fingers were twitching in protest. Akko sighed. “At least she didn't go in drag to find the Holy Grail this time. What's everyone so worried about? It's not like this is the weirdest thing that's ever happened to any of us.”

Diana frowned. “At a guess, much of the concern may be less because of what happened, and more because of who she is.”

Who Amanda was? Akko let her raised eyebrows do the responding on that one, and returned her attention to the reporters. Croix was talking to them now, and it looked like they were hanging on her every word.

Akko's eyes glazed over as she watched, like a film was growing over them. Good old Professor Croix, always so good at getting people to do what she wanted—
“Akko? Akko?”

Akko jolted back to reality. It occurred to her that Diana had probably said her name more than twice. “I spaced out, sorry,” she said, rubbing her neck as she refocused on Diana. “What was that again?”

“I was asking if you knew anything about her family.” Diana's gaze wasn't annoyed, but it was serious.

“Well…” Akko did her thinking-pout, as if the expression was actually helping her memory. Maybe it was. Who knew? “I guess she mentioned her parents being on her back the other day. And… something about her grandmother, maybe?” She shrugged. “But she doesn't usually bring that kind of thing up.”

Diana nodded. “I didn't know about them either, so I looked them up, and I think I understand why she generally doesn't mention them. As it turns out, the O'Neills are… rather wealthy.”

Akko shrugged without breaking eye contact.

Diana frowned. “You aren't surprised?”

“I mean, no? I'm pretty sure I'm the first non-rich person Luna Nova's accepted in, like, forever, so I kinda figure everyone here's a little wealthy.” She laughed. “Heck, Lotte probably has a nest egg squirreled away somewhere.”

“No, you don't… let me provide some context.” Diana took a deep breath, as if reassuring herself before a bungee jump, then leaned and dropped her voice to a whisper. “Amanda O'Neill makes me look poor.”

Oh. Akko's jaw dropped.

“I know. I don't like to admit it either.”

“But, but—” Akko took a few seconds to find her voice again. “We were at a thrift shop! She was buying shoes at a thrift shop, and you're telling me she—”

“Could have probably bought the store itself.” Diana paused for consideration. “And the town the shop was in. And the county the town was in, come to that.”

“But, but—”

Constanze threw down her screwdriver with a clang, then stood and pressed a button at the top of the slab she'd been working on. The slab started hissing, cranking, and unfolding info something whose shape wasn't immediately clear.

“Did you two know about that?” Akko asked, taking a step toward her and Jasminka.

Jasminka had been about to stuff a cookie in her mouth, but she paused to look at Akko. “She didn't want us to tell anyone.” There were bags under her eyes, now that Akko was looking straight at her. How much had she slept in the past two days?

“But why?” Akko stamped her foot. “What's so good about having a secret identity? I know it sounds cool, but trust me, it’s not!”

The thing Constanze had built finished unfolding, and now Akko could see what it was: a Stanbot
with some unusually thick arms to contrast with its tiny legs. Constanze tapped its head and pointed it at the reporters, and it toddled off toward them.

Akko and Diana watched with mutual interest.

“Question time is over!” the Stanbot said in the high-pitched synthesized voice that Akko knew so well. “Leave now! Leave now!”

The reporters glanced at the approaching robot, and then returned their attention to Professor Croix. A bunch of them scoffed.

Akko could have told them that was a mistake, even before what happened next. As soon as the Stanbot reached them, it spread its thick arms wide in a T pose, and then they made a kachunk noise. Then, they telescoped out with a sound like a fishing line being cast. The articulated steel reached all around the reporters, grabbing them in a tight bear hug and lifting them off the ground as they squawked and struggled.

Jasminka stood up and walked over in turn. “Thanks for stopping by!” she said in her usual, sugary sweet tone. “Have a nice day!” And with an expression on her face like she couldn't hurt a fly, she reached down and picked up the Stanbot, and everyone it was carrying. It looked like she was picking up a toddler.

The reporters cried out in further dismay as Jasminka carried them to the door and tossed them through. She and the Stanbot walked back inside, then slammed the door shut, and the Stanbot spread its arms wide to bar the door as Jasminka returned.

Croix raised an eyebrow. “As a teacher, I shouldn’t applaud that… but who am I kidding?” She snorted. “Nice work on the magitronic, Constanze.” Constanze raised a thumbs up, then pulled out another robot from her shirt and got right back to tinkering.

"Now when are you going to grade that homework for me?” Croix added with a squint. Constanze leaned further forward over her work, clearly pretending not to have heard, as Jasminka got right back to eating.

Stress eating, now that Akko looked. Most of the time, when Jasminka was eating like a bear preparing for winter, she went for doughnuts, pastries, and generally fresh delights. Around exam times, however, she tended to switch to processed foods. Chips, Cheetos, even Twinkies. Akko counted about a dozen wrappers of the latter on the floor around Jaz, and the number was growing.

“I don't get it,” Akko said, slumping her chin into her hands as she sat down. “What’s so bad about Amanda's family that she wouldn't want to tell anyone?”

Three short sharp knocks sounded against the front door, from the outside. They echoed through the hall.

Akko looked up. The Stanbot, still valiantly barring the door, let out a shrill of, “Go away! Go away!”

“I'm sorry,” Chariot called out, “but I don't think we're speaking to any more reporters at this time!”

“Oh, we're not reporters, Professor,” said the voice on the other side of the door. Young, British, professional—but still fundamentally friendly. “We're here to help.”

Akko gasped. She got to her feet, ran to the door, and bonked the Stanbot on its head with her fist:
its arms retracted in an instant. Then she yanked the double doors open and yelled, “Andrew!”

“Hey there, Akko,” said Andrew. He was dressed in his usual suit, and the smile that was somewhat less usual (though Akko liked to think she'd done her part to make it usualer). He raised his hand in a wave, and Akko promptly ignored it in favor of a hug. “Hey, whoa,” he said, gently pushing her off. “This is a business trip.”

“It can be two things!” Akko threw her hands out in the universal palms-up gesture of confusion. “Where have you been? I feel like we haven't talked in forever!”

“I'm sorry to say I've been busy!” He shrugged, smiling a little wider. “And it looks like you and Diana have been too. I read about that Magic Outreach Program of yours.”

“The MOP!” Akko beamed.

“Yeah, that! You're really making your mark, aren't you?”

“Ugh,” said a blond boy to Andrew's left. Akko recognized him from Appleton Academy, the guy that Amanda had gotten in a swordfight with. His name was… she wanted to say, Leeroy? “If we're quite finished with the pleasantries? We're not here to catch up with witches.”

“Oh, I'm gonna have to disagree with you there, buddy,” said the boy to Leeroy(?)’s left in turn. That was Frank - Lotte's friend. “We're here to do interviews, right? And gather information? That means talking to cute girls!”


Andrew sighed. “Louis is right. We do need to get to work. I'm sure our guests wouldn't be happy if we delayed.”

Oh, so it was Louis. Well, she'd gotten close enough. Akko smiled, and then realized Andrew had said other stuff besides a name. “Guests?” She looked past Andrew for the first time. Her eyes widened.

Flanked on both sides by security guards—who looked exactly like Mayor Bloomington's had; did they get ordered off Amazon or something?—were a man and a woman. The man had a flamboyantly yellow suit, the kind of color that clashed with every other color in the visible light spectrum, and the woman had her hair in ringlets and huge, golden, and diamond-studded earrings in the shapes of dollar signs. They jingled as she walked.

One other thing about them: the woman's hair was the same red as Amanda's hair, and the man's was the same orange as the other part of Amanda's hair.

Akko blinked. She had the feeling she'd be finding out, very soon, why Amanda didn't talk about her parents.

A little beedly-beep sounded in Croix’s ear, and she glanced to the side, where a heads-up-display was sending her a pop-up alert. She frowned. “Apparently the Headmistress wants to see me,” she said, shrugging at Chariot.
Chariot sighed. “Well, I’ve got to go anyway. Magic practice at our usual time?”

“Obviously.” Croix smiled. “I can’t wait for you to teach me *Belga Veeda*. I still can’t believe you mastered that one before I did.”

Chariot frowned. It was almost like Croix’s enthusiasm at learning one of the most destructive spells ever devised was bothering her, or something, but the frown didn’t last long. “Until then!”

Croix smiled, and then poked her index finger down in a very particular way, as if pressing a power button. From Chariot’s perspective, she knew that it just looked like the holographic display of Croix disappearing, leaving the disc beneath it to fly off and be unobtrusive somewhere. From Croix’s perspective, the experience was quite different.

Luna Nova’s vaunted and orderly halls vanished, leaving behind a scraggly Indian forest, with hills in the distance. The droids that had been projecting Luna Nova’s image to Croix flew a little ways away, and Croix hopped off the one that had been capturing her image. Then she picked her machete off the ground, which was where she’d left it because reporters typically reacted adversely to large knives.

Croix shut her eyes for a few seconds, letting them adjust, then advanced through the forest. One of her droids hovered in front of her and to her right, providing a heads-up display of how long she had to go until she reached her destination—but since the destination in question was in the hills, clearly visible even in the forest, the information was a little redundant.

What was less redundant was the heat signature approaching her from behind, visible on her minimap.

Croix frowned. She *could* fly a hundred feet above the treetops and just take Headmistress Holbrooke’s call, but in her experience, the teachers preferred it when she took a few minutes to arrive after a summons. As if she’d had to *walk* there.

She snorted. *Luddites.* But she had to fill her time *somehow*, so she trotted forward, clearing the way with her machete when appropriate, until she found a clearing to wait in. Therein she sat.

She didn’t have to wait long. A flicker of movement betrayed the panther’s presence in only a few seconds, and Croix saw it prowling near the edge of the clearing. She flicked her eyes up, and her droid flew above the clearing.

Then Croix stretched out and yawned, and closed her eyes.

The panther growled. She heard it pounce. Then she heard the high pitched whine of her droid’s magical cage activating, and the less high pitched whine of the panther as it slammed face-first into the cage.

She pushed herself up and stood. “You are *beautiful*,” she said. “And also listed as *vulnerable* on the endangered species list, so I suppose I don’t get to find out what panther ramen tastes like.”

The panther growled, pacing in a cage that few witches (and definitely no panthers) could break. Croix tapped a tattoo onto a device at her wrist, directing the droid containing the panther to take images and scans. A little bit of esoteric knowledge never hurt anyone, and when it came to solving Wagandea’s curse, she’d long since learned the value of untraditional sources. Maybe she’d get a blood sample, snip off a bit of fur….

But a little alarm blipped on another nearby droid. It had been long enough since Holbrooke’s summons. Croix yawned again, hopped up, and let the droid slip under her feet; then she leaned
against the energy cage and said, “Begin call: Miranda Holbrooke’s office.”

The panther behind her snarled. “Shush,” she said.

Shafts of light rose around her, and resolved themselves within a second into the headmistress’s office. If Croix squinted, she could make out the Indian forest around her, so she tried not to squint; the droids would warn her if any threats were on their way. So she just smiled and said, “You wanted to see me, Headmistress?”

“Yes, Professor,” the Headmistress said, looking rather unimpressed. “Although I wish you would knock before entering. Even if you aren’t coming through the door.” She glanced up at an open window, through which the autonomous droid had probably entered.

Croix sighed. “If you insist.”

“Now, about this press nonsense….”

Another snarl came from behind Croix. Holbrooke’s eyes widened. “Croix, is there a panther behind you?”

“Yes, and it’s staying there until it learns to be polite.” Croix smirked and rapped her knuckles against the cage, causing a little bolt of energy to zap out. The panther keened.

“Er. Yes.” Now the headmistress looked impressed, but she was clearly doing her best to hide it. “In any case….”

“I’m sure we’re all very busy people here, Headmistress.” Croix frowned and crossed her arms. “What do you need from me?”

Headmistress Holbrooke’s eyes hardened, and Croix got the immediate sensation that she’d gone too far. “Since you value brevity, I’ll get straight to the point. You are to use all your available resources to locate Amanda O’Neill and return her to Luna Nova, on pain of losing your employment at this school.”

Croix flinched.

“Ah, so we’re taking this seriously now. Allow me to explain.” Holbrooke smiled and steepled her fingers. “Miss Meridies, to call your position at this academy ‘tenuous’ is to grossly overstate your job security. Put bluntly, we all know what you did.”

Croix gulped, and nodded. They sure did. Holbrooke and Finnelan (and, obviously, Chariot) had caught her red-handed as she’d unleashed the Noir Rod upon the world. As she’d… nearly caused nuclear armageddon. That one hurt to think about.

“We know.” Holbrooke leaned forward. “And we put it to a vote, internally—you weren’t invited, obviously—and Chariot managed to be surprisingly convincing. She argued that you would do more good in a classroom than in a cell. And thus we have kept mum on the subject of your… misadventures.”

She sighed, and grumbled under her breath. “And now a student has gone missing—an heiress, apparently—and the press is swarming the school. Investigating. Digging for dirt. Looking for any way to disparage this school’s reputation, just for the sake of increased readership. I trust someone who spends as much time analyzing data as you can see the connection?”

Croix tried to moderate her breathing. She’d known that Holbrooke had been the headmistress
since forever, decades before Croix’s enrollment at the very least. It occurred to her that she’d never put much thought into how she had maintained that position. She must have survived whatever intraschool politics there would be somehow.

“Honestly, I’d hate to see anything happen to you,” Holbrooke said with another sigh. “You really were a bright student, and I agree with Chariot that you can help bring this school into the future we’re all looking for. But make no mistake. If word gets out of what you did on Starfall, I will be forced to throw you to the lions to maintain a shred of Luna Nova’s good name—and I will do so without hesitation for the sake of my school. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.”

Holbrooke smiled, and got out of her chair to walk around her desk. “I know it’s frustrating,” she said in that infuriatingly knowing way of hers, like she was everybody’s wise grandmother. “Taking time off from your grand mission. But Chariot will understand how important this is, after all. Nothing’s more important than our students.”

Croix groaned. “I suppose. Is there anything else, Headmistress?”

Another smile. “I think Miss Kagari is probably going to investigate too. Not that I’ve heard from her, but it seems like the kind of thing she would do. You two should coordinate.”

“Right. If you’ll excuse me, Headmistress. I’ll get to work right away.” Croix jabbed down with her index finger, ending the call, and only then did she let her grimace show. She sighed, slumping against the wall and letting herself slide down to sit upon the forest floor.

_Akko._

The panther whined. “Hey, you think you have it bad?” she said, fixing it with a glare in its cage. “At least you didn’t make the cage yourself.” She snapped her fingers and the cage disappeared. The panther glared at her, snarled, and prowled forward.

Croix smiled, then waved it closer. “Come on, don’t be chicken!”

It stopped. Croix waved harder. “Come on! If you maul me, I bet I can get out of this ridiculous search and rescue! Just a nibble?”

It stared at her, then turned around and ran for the trees, disappearing within seconds into the obscure underbrush.

Croix snickered, then actually laughed, laying back on the grass. “Damnit,” she wheezed. For now, she waved a droid over and tapped out a message to Chariot on a holographic keyboard: _Might have to abridge our magic practice tonight. Sorry._

“Oh, my poor dear,” Mrs. O’Neill said, wiping her clearly dry eyes with an expensive handkerchief before giving it back to her husband. “My poor Amanda Panda.”

Akko winced in sympathy—not for the mother, but for _Amanda Panda_. And the more Mrs. O’Neill kept ‘sobbing’, the more she cringed. The other people at the table—the O’Neills, Diana, and Andrew and his group—weren’t reacting at all, and Akko wondered if she should stop.
“There there, my dear,” Mr. O’Neill said dully. “She’ll be okay. But we really need to start telling them what to do.”

“All right.” Mrs. O’Neill sniffed. “All right.” She picked up a roll from a tray piled high in front of her, one of several trays the school’s fairies were bringing. Luna Nova had a way of buttering up VIPs, and actual butter featured heavily in the strategy. “So what I should say first is….” She looked up, her sadness gone out the window. “My mother is the reason fortune tellers are banned from playing the stock market.”

Akko blinked. Then she looked from side to side, and saw that no one else seemed to be acting like this was a weird segue. So was Akko the crazy one?

“What do you mean?” Andrew said in an even tone, leaning forward.

“You mean you’ve never heard of Amalthea O’Neill?” Mrs. O’Neill laughed. “The most accomplished fortune teller in the world? She made our family’s fortune in the nineteen twenties, of course.”

Louis’s eyes narrowed. “How old must the woman be? It’s been nearly a century since then.”

“Almost a hundred and twenty,” Amanda’s father said, beaming lazily. “But she doesn’t look a day over ninety! She had my wife at a rather advanced age, like us with Amanda. Regrettably my dear wife didn’t inherit her talents: apparently fortune telling often skips a generation—”

“In any case,” Amanda’s mother said, and then swallowed another roll whole. “A few acquisitions here, a few mergers there, and wallah! The O’Neill Group! And the continued stock predictions don’t hurt,” she added, with a smile that she seemed to think was sly.

“Wait, no.” Akko leaned over the table, planting her hands on it. “Didn’t you just say fortune tellers aren’t allowed in the stock market anymore? How is she still making predictions?”

Mrs. O’Neill laughed again. “My dear kid, you don’t know my mother! She made all the predictions when she started out, and she just wrote them down! There’s been no new predictions, so the law can’t touch her, but they’re still accurate.”

“You might say,” Mr. O’Neill said, leaning in, “that she’s been… grandmothered in?”

“But you wouldn’t.” Mrs. O’Neill’s gaze was flat. “Because that would be terrible.”

Akko frowned. “All right, then what does any of this have to do with Amanda?”

“Everything.” Mrs. O’Neill pulled out a series of manila folders—well, not quite manila: each had an orange tint, as well as an embossed A on the front. “Because my mother has chosen you all to help her find Amanda Panda. And now that you know she’s the greatest fortune teller on Earth, you’ll take it seriously, won’t you?”

With a wave of her wand, three of the folders flew out and landed in front of Andrew, Diana, and Akko. “They’ll let you know when you need to read their contents,” Mrs. O’Neill said, “so you needn’t look a moment before then. That’s all. Thank you for all your help!”

And like that, she stood and started packing up her purse. “Wait a minute,” Andrew said, brow furrowed as he stood too. “Why thank us when we haven’t done anything yet?”

“But because you most certainly will, so what does it matter when I thank you?” Mrs. O’Neill winked and turned to leave.
“Wait another minute!” Akko yelled. “Why did she leave?”

Mr. O’Neill frowned. “Pardon?”

“Before she vanished, she was talking about you, and about her grandmother.” Akko walked around the table, standing right up next to the O’Neills. “She said you’ve been on her case.”

“Akko,” Diana hissed.

Akko ignored her. “So what’s the deal? Why did she run away?” And she realized it almost as she was saying it: Amanda hadn’t just vanished, because whatever power had sent her away could have sent her back if she’d wanted it, right? So if Amanda wasn’t back, then that meant—

Ow ow ow ow ow. Something was pushing on her nose, sliding her backward across the floor. Mrs. O’Neill had her wand out, and was tutting. “Personal space, little girl! And frankly it doesn’t matter why she’s vanished, only that she’s vanished. Trust me, those folders will make everything better, as long as you do as you’re told.” She winked. “Speaking from personal experience.”

Akko grabbed at her nose, trying not to yell with pain. Mrs. O’Neill returned her wand to her purse and gave a little wave. “Well, that’s all for now, but I imagine we’ll be in touch. Addyoo!”

Out of the corner of Akko’s eye, Diana took a deep breath. Probably at the butchering of adieu.

“I could really see myself in these!” Amanda said, and then heaved a breath.

For an instant, just an instant, there had been a huge rushing feeling, like the world’s fastest subways had been flying past her on all sides. And now, she wasn’t in the thrift shop anymore. She didn’t seem to be in Glastonbury at all. This was a wide-open field of grain, stalks pressing up against her on every side. Above her was nothing but a cloudy sky so unlike the beautiful day in Glastonbury, and the smell in her nose was thick with dirt.

She heaved another breath. “What the hell,” she murmured. And then, since there apparently wasn’t anyone around anyway, she yelled it. “What the hell?”

The wheat felt claustrophobic and generally crappy all around her body. Growling under her breath, Amanda looked around and hopped until she could see the closest edge of the field. Then she cursed under her breath and stomped that way. Not like she had any idea what was happening, but this field sucked and she wanted out—but it looked like it would take about twenty minutes of pushing through crummy wheat stalks to get there.

“The hell is going on,” she muttered, and then she said, “Whoa!”, because her shoe caught on some loose rock in the ground. She went sprawling forward, landing hard on her elbows, and felt her right foot kick her left painfully.

“I need,” she said through gritted teeth, “to be out of this freaking field.” She pushed herself up, and took three steps forward, and—

A rush of movement, and then clear air in front of her. She froze. Then looked back at the wheat field behind her, which she had not actually walked through.
Comprehension dawnded like light through the clouds. She’d gotten a somewhat mysterious pair of shoes, and she’d kicked them together, and three steps later she’d teleported. And it had happened again. She wasn’t Akko, for cripes’ sake: she could spot a connection when it punched her in the face.

Amanda looked up, took a breath, and focused on a distant hill with a row of sleek, modern windmills on it. She focused on wanting to go there. And then she kicked one shoe into the other, walked three steps, found herself rushing forward, and shrieked —because she hadn’t ended up on the hill, but on the windmill. Her arms pinwheeled for balance in the wind.

From here she could see for miles and miles. It also felt like she could fall for miles and miles, and she gulped—but it had worked, hadn’t it? Whatever these shoes were, this was how they worked.

So she relaxed. Getting back to Luna Nova would be a cinch.

But… getting anywhere else would be, too. And Akko had kind of been ticking her off. And everything had been ticking her off.

She frowned. She looked out over the huge, huge world. And then she laughed, and kicked one foot into the other, and took three steps that would have launched her over the edge—and she disappeared with a blur of motion.

I bet Tahiti’s not cloudy.
“Diana?” Akko asked.

Midmorning light streamed in through the windows of the cafeteria. The two of them had gotten their own table to sit at, in the shade. Andrew, Louis, and Frank were still at the main table, speaking feverishly in voices Akko couldn’t hear. Diana, in contrast, stared at the folders sitting in front of her, and didn't say a word. “Diana?” Akko said again.

“Hm?” Diana blinked, then looked at her. “What is it?”

“Is it just me, or is something really….” Akko squirmed. “Off about Amanda’s parents?”

Diana frowned, just a little. “You mean how they don’t love her.” The tone of her voice was curiously flat. “Or each other, for that matter.”

Akko winced. “Whoa. You’re sure it’s that bad?”

“I know what a household with love in it looks like.” Diana exhaled, like a whisper of a sigh. “And one without.”

Akko felt like she got why Diana’s voice was so flat. Under the table, she reached out her hand, brushing it against Diana’s, and Diana didn’t hesitate to grab it back.

“So,” Akko finally said half a minute later. “Does that mean we're not gonna help them?”

“On the contrary.” Diana's smile was a bit rueful. “We want Amanda back too, after all. I can work with them for now.”

“Okay, but it still feels wrong to do what they’re telling us. I mean, what—” Akko reached out and grabbed Diana’s folder “—what’s even in these?”

She opened it. Squinted.

*It’s rude to read things that aren’t yours, Kagari.*

Beneath the words was another embossed, ornate A. “Okay,” Akko said, and closed the folder slowly. “That’s creepy.”

A movement from the boys’ table caught her attention: Frank and Louis (Akko swore she had to stop herself from calling him Leroy, *every* time) were standing up and walking out of the cafeteria. Andrew, on the other hand, walked over to their table.

Diana’s hand slipped from Akko’s grasp, and she held it out for a handshake as she stood. “It’s been too long, Andrew. You say you’ve been busy?”

“Isn’t everyone?” He smiled as he took her hand, and she smiled too, if only briefly. “I hope you’re doing well, Diana. You seem… tense.”

Diana stiffened. She hadn’t really seemed tense before—well, she had to *Akko*, maybe, but Akko was pretty sure that other people wouldn’t pick up on how her motions looked ever *so slightly* rehearsed. But then again, Andrew had known her forever. Akko sighed. “Amanda’s terrible parents reminded her of her terrible….”
She trailed off, noticing Diana’s glare. “Parental… figure, I wasn’t supposed to blab that, was I.”

Diana didn’t answer, because the look she was giving was enough. Akko drew herself inward, hunching a little. “Sorry.”

Andrew smiled ruefully. “It’s all right. We’ve all been there.”

“I haven’t,” Akko mumbled, still hunched inward.

“In any case.” Diana released Akko’s hand, as if it had suddenly flared red-hot, and sat. “What have you been busy with?”

“Oh. Well, that’s your fault.” Andrew wasn’t smiling now. His best serious look was directed at them, and Akko felt the warm atmosphere cooling. “Do you know what you two did? Do you have any idea of the sheer magnitude?”

Andrew sat, still staring between the two of them. “Before the day of Starfall, do you know how many witches there were? Worldwide?”

Akko shook her head.

“Neither do we!” Andrew threw out his hands. Well, he held them out slightly, palms raised up. The effect of the gesture was as someone less professionally reserved had thrown out their hands. “Between declining rates of magic, and the fact that a witch was just like any other person outside a sorcerer’s stone—and there’s only a couple hundred stones worldwide—the number of visibly magical individuals was so low that most governments didn’t even keep track. Britain’s too. Our best estimates were, at most, a million worldwide.”

“That’s not that small—” Akko stopped, frowned, and did some math in her head. “No, that’s less than one percent, isn’t it.”

“Less than one tenth of one percent. A rounding error. It stopped being a census question in the forties!” Andrew closed his eyes and pressed a finger to his temple, for just a second. “And we’re regretsing it now. Guess what the new percentage is.”

“Ten,” Diana said.

“Well, you’d know. Yes, as close as we can guess…. Andrew’s finger dragged down his head, and then he stood. “Ten percent, actually ten percent of the population of planet Earth, now has magic. Almost all of them have no idea what to do with it. “You can see how that might make people like my father anxious.”

Andrew started walking, and Akko and Diana followed. “But magic’s the best thing ever,” Akko said. “How is this bad?”

“Weren’t you two just dealing with an incident where a new witch blew up her house?” Andrew grimaced. “How many British citizens are bombs now? And that’s not getting into troublemakers, gangs, any kind of violent crime you could ask for from domestic disputes up to terror attacks.” He sighed. “And that’s not getting into the missile that started this whole thing. We’re certain magic had something to do with that, but we have no leads on who or why.”

Akko fidgeted with her hands behind her back. Diana didn’t visibly respond.

“Akko, Diana,” Andrew looked them both dead in the eyes, and Akko hoped the fidgeting wasn’t too obvious. “I consider you both my dear friends. And I’m certainly glad you stopped that missile.
But you’ve opened Pandora’s Box, and no one’s equipped to deal with what’s come out. Everyone’s scrambling.”

He rolled his shoulders, then turned away and started walking. “And that’s what brings me into the thick of things. Not many people involved with the government have any experience with witchcraft, so my father’s pulled me in because I have. And Frank and Louis, to a lesser extent.”

“Wait, what?” Akko pulled up beside him. “The nutjob who wanted to execute Amanda is one of your experts?”

Andrew stared grimly back. “We’re that short staffed. The problem—” he let out a sigh, still staring at Akko “—is information. We don’t have enough of it.” He drew in another breath, and then his features softened again. “Which is why I’m here, talking to you. The O’Neills went straight to the British government when Amanda vanished, and I got pulled in, and now…. Louis and Frank are off doing research of their own, but Akko, you were there when Amanda disappeared, weren’t you?”

Akko nodded, then frowned. “How’d you know I was there?”

“Akko, you’re the biggest trouble magnet on the face of the Earth. The laws of the universe would have to be rewritten for you not to be there.” He stared levelly at her. Which meant he wasn’t looking where he was going, and walked into a hunched figure in the hallway. “Oh, pardon me, ma’am.”

The figure, whom Akko recognized as Professor Lukić, grumbled and kept hobbling. Very slowly.

“So tell me,” Andrew said, “what happened?”

“Miss Vandergard!”

Tiff, who had been in the process of packing up her books after potions class, looked up with a jolt. Professor Lukić held one wrinkled hand, and beckoned with a finger distinguishable from bones more by color than shape. “Stay behind, reddened child. We need to talk after class.”

“Oh,” Char said, grinning, “someone’s in trouble.”

“I’m not in—” Tiff swallowed. “Maybe I am. I don’t know.”

She wasn’t, and she did know. She knew something very big that she didn’t even feel comfortable telling her friends. And it felt miserable. She grimaced as Char and Mani joined the crowd of students leaving the room, until it was just Tiff and Lukić.

Well, no. Until it was just Tiff and Lucretia.

“You look troubled,” Lucretia said. She tapped her cane on the floor, and the door to the room slammed shut behind the students leaving it. For a moment, Tiff saw the faint suggestion of dozens of locks and chains over it. Lucretia stood a little straighter. “Something trapped in your head, that needs to be let out? Some errant thought? Maybe troubles with your broom?”

What an incredibly odd way to ask. “I just… it’s not about the Shooting Star. I feel like I’m not
helping anyone.” Tiff sighed. “I swear I’m trying to help, and I feel like I keep doing it wrong.”

“Troubling, for sure.” Lucretia smiled. “You’ve heard about the O’Neill girl, right?”

“The one who vanished?” Tiff frowned. “Are you saying I should try to… what, help find her? I’ve never even met her.”

“Not saying, only asking what you know!” With a little cackle, Lucretia hobbled toward the door. “You know, she went and got some very lovely red boots before leaving? The airhead was talking all about it to that rich boy. And now even Croix is looking for her, did you know that?”

Tiff frowned more. “No. Why would I know that?”

Lucretia paused before the door and let out a little groan of annoyance. It gave the feeling that Lucretia was telling her something important. And doing it in the most circumlocutious way possible, as far as she could tell. “Look,” Tiff said, “is there something you want me to know? And if so, can you just say it?”

“I can’t give you all the answers, reddened child. The teacher’s job is to point the student along the path, not carry her down it.” Lucretia tapped the floor with her cane again, and the suggestions of chains and locks appeared again, but this time Tiff saw an image of them breaking. “But I can say that Scarlette had color-coordination down to a T.” She cracked a smile back at Tiff, pushing open the door. “Everything matched. Including her broom.”

She walked through the door, and it shut, leaving Tiff alone.

Tiff groaned, sat down, and put her head in her hands. “So what,” she said, thinking out loud, “all of her other clothes are red? So what does that have to do with anything?”

She sat there for five more minutes.

Then she yelled, bolted up, and ran out the door.

Mrs. and Mr. O’Neill chased after the short girl with the bow in her hair, but she marched stubbornly away from them. “Please!” Mr. O’Neill said. “A moment of your time!”

She glanced over her shoulder. She seemed to have a robot riding piggyback on her shoulders.

“Please, it’s about Amanda Panda!” Mrs. O’Neill brandished two orange folders, labeled Constanze Amalie von Braunschbank Albrechtsberger (the words barely fit on the front) and Jasminka Antonenko. “Don’t you care about her?”

Constanze stopped, and glanced again. So Mrs. O’Neill stopped too, and crouched down to the girl’s level, and put on a big smile. “You’re one of Amanda’s little friends, right? You must know how important it is to bring her back to her loving family.”

Constanze rolled her eyes and reached out to the wall. Mrs. O’Neill growled and stepped forward. “What are you doing, you little—”

As soon as Constanze’s hand made contact, the bit of wall she was touching glowed like a smartphone turning on, and then the whole panel swung around, bringing Constanze and her robot
behind the wall. “Hey!” Mrs. O’Neill trotted to the wall and slapped it with her hand, several times, but it didn’t budge. “Why, you diminutive—!”

“Calm down, dear.” Mr. O’Neill rested his hand on her shoulder. “It’s all right.”

“But—Mother specifically said to recruit her!” Mrs. O’Neill found her jaw hanging slack. “She’s never been wrong before!”

“She’s never been wrong at all.” Mr. O’Neill smiled. “So she’s not wrong now, is she?”

“But we’re supposed to—”

“No, your mother told us to. But what she tells us isn’t always what she really wants to happen, now is it?”

“Ex… cuse me?”

Diana, on her way to class, halted. A woman she didn’t recognize was beckoning to her from a side hallway. She was dressed like she worked at a hotel, with a familiar orange A embossed on the side of her dress, and she glanced around frantically before hissing, “Miss Cavendish?”

“Can I help you in some way?” Diana asked, taking a step toward her.

“Ssh,” the woman said, beckoning more frantically. “If they find out I’m talking to you, my job is…” She winced, looking pained. Diana was put in mind of the maids at her house, reacting to whatever the latest inane order was from Aunt Daryl.

Her heart went out, and she rushed over to the woman to speak in a hushed tone. “You’re a maid who works for the O’Neills, aren’t you?” It made sense: the O’Neills likely had more modern sensibilities, so their maids would wear a more modern outfit.

“I work for Amanda.” The woman backed away around a corner, and Diana followed so that they weren’t in sight of the main corridor anymore. “Listen. I know they must have told you to find her. I don’t know what they’re trying to do at that point, but….” She reached into a pocket and pulled out a plain little box, tied closed with a simple bow. “If… when you find her, if she looks like she’s in trouble, give her this, okay? It’ll mean a lot to her.”

Diana accepted the box without comment.

“Don’t tell anyone about this, please,” the woman whispered. “I’ve got to go. Thank you so much, you have no idea how much this means to her.”

Like that, she hurried away out of sight. Diana frowned, then pocketed the box and continued to class.

Mani and Char were almost to class when Mani heard the voice from behind her. “Can you please
tell Professor Badcock I won’t make it to class!”

Mani turned around, then jumped back as Tiff nearly tackled her. Also, she was holding the Shooting Star in one hand and a heavy book in the other. “Tiff!” Mani yelped. “What’s going on?”

“Just—there’s something I need to do, okay? Like really need to do!” Tiff brandished the Shooting Star. “I’ve figured out what she means!”

“What?” Char’s question was more of a yawn, all things considered.

“She kept saying to find the rest of her. Like she isn’t all here—” Tiff shook the Star eagerly “—and she isn’t! She’s in more than one piece!”

Char finished yawning. “Whuh.”

“I just did some looking up in the library.” Tiff held up the book. “Grabbed this from some blond guy, don’t know what a boy’s doing at Luna Nova—anyway, look at this!” She opened the book to a place where she’d stuck her index finger, and read aloud: “Most seven-league boots are limited to the range implied by their name on each step, which makes them useful but not the end-all of travel; a witch will, for instance, struggle to cross oceans given that she has nothing to step on. However, certain more powerful variations have been reputed to exist. According to legend, the Olde Witch Scarlette had a pair of seven-thousand-league boots, able to travel to any point on Earth in an instant, although this has never been confirmed.”

“Hm.” Char frowned. “Nah, still don’t get it.”

“It’s—it’s hers! It’s Scarlette’s boots, like this—” she shook the Shooting Star “—is Scarlette’s broom! And I think it has a piece of her in it! Whatever happened to put her in the Shooting Star sort of—sort of split her into pieces, and one piece is in those boots! I need to get them!”

“Tiff,” Mani said, her voice level and solemn, “I’m saying this as your friend. Did you get enough sleep last night?”

“Of course I did—look, I can’t tell you how I know these are hers, but—” Tiff made a noise like she had mucus in her throat that she couldn’t cough up in the present company “—I promise you it’s the only thing that makes sense!”

“Aight. So.” Char yawned again. “What do we do about it?”

“Just—just cover for me, okay? I need to go find Amanda O’Neill!” She smiled earnestly. “Thanks, Char!”

Then she ran off. “Stop saying that,” she said as she ran, and she seemed to be looking at the Shooting Star, which didn’t seem to be talking. “I’m getting you back together, so quit it!”

She was gone. “Do I snore?” Mani said. “Do I snore and not know about it? Because that would explain if she hasn’t been getting enough sleep.”

But Char was smiling. “Our Tiff, skipping class.” She sighed. “I’m so proud. Maybe she’ll say the ‘hell’ word someday. It’s inspiring.”

“No, Char.”

“In fact, I’m inspired to lie down right here and—”
“No.” Mani planted her hands into Char’s back and started pushing.

“Dammit.”

“Diana! Do you have a moment?”

The voice was self-satisfied, and unctuous, and worst of all it was Croix’s. Diana, who’d been on the way to class, turned to face the hologram that had appeared beside her. As usual, Diana’s face was a picture of calm.

Usually the picture wasn’t this much of a lie, but as they said, when in Rome…. “May I help you, Professor Meridies?” she said, cordial as ever.

“Professor Croix, please. I’m a cool teacher. And the real question is, can I help you?” Croix smiled, and leaned down, but her disk rose slightly, so she wasn’t any less dominantly positioned over Diana. “Headmistress Holbrooke has told me to investigate Amanda O’Neill’s disappearance, and also told me Atsuko was working on investigating it as well—and I can only presume you’re working with her. I’m sure you can see where I’m going with this.”

Diana folded her arms and let the silence draw out. Eventually, Croix was forced to fill it. “You know, Diana, I’ve always seen a lot of myself in you. We’re both rational, capable minds; both problem solvers when the people around us won’t step up; and both willing to work past previous misgivings if it means getting the job done. So I’m sure you wouldn’t mind working with me to help bring Amanda home?”

“Professor?” Diana raised a finger. “I’d like to offer some advice.”

Croix frowned. “Pardon?”

“If you mean to manipulate me into thinking well of you,” Diana said, her tone just as polite as before, “then please don’t compare the two of us. It’s not as flattering as you seem to think, Professor Meridies.”

That shut her up. Diana smiled in her head, and didn’t let it show; if anything, her expression grew harder. After a few seconds of dumbfounded stupor, Croix sighed and floated down to Diana’s eye level. “I wasn’t actually trying to manipulate—”

“No, my apologies. I shouldn’t have implied you intended it, when it so clearly comes as second nature to you.” By now, Diana couldn’t keep the disdain from her face, and stopped trying. “What do you want, Professor?”

Croix stared at her, then floated backward and further into a corner—less easy to be overheard, perhaps. “I want to find Amanda, like I said. Is that really so hard to believe?” She rolled her eyes. “Do you think I’m trying to use her for some inane scheme? I don’t actually care about it, but the Headmistress won’t let me get back to my real work until she’s found, so… there. Happy?”

“Are you asking if I’m happy to learn you don’t actually care about finding Miss O’Neill?”

“Why do you have to—” Croix groaned and rubbed her forehead. “Look, do you want to pool resources or not? Do you want my significantly useful help, or not?”
Diana stared levelly at Croix, at least in the most literal sense. In her mind, however, Diana felt like she was staring at some other things: at evenings and weeks and months and years she’d spent alone, trying to practice magic, rarely succeeding. The fruit of the last time Croix had offered someone her *significantly useful* help.

“Thank you,” Diana said, with a smile too slight to be detected under most microscopes, “but I think we’ll be quite all right on our own. In fact, I’d appreciate it if you stayed out of this matter altogether.”

“Oh, Diana, don’t be ridiculous.” Croix snorted, and her voice raised a little. “You can’t actually force me not to look into the Amanda situation.”

“Then consider it a polite request, Professor Meridies.” Diana found her voice becoming harder despite herself. “From someone whom you owe several years worth of favors.” She nodded, said, “If you’ll excuse me,” then turned and walked away.

Her hand was shaking. She made an effort to still it.

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Croix stared after her. “Sorry, Diana,” she muttered under her breath, “I can’t do that.”

Letting out a little hiss of displeasure, she lifted her finger to make the gesture that deactivated her hologram, but—“ *Professor Meridies!* ” came a cry from behind.

She turned round, eyebrow raised. One of the younger girls—Tiff Vandergard, if she remembered correctly?—had rushed toward her. In one hand she clutched, and Croix’s eyes threatened to bulge when she saw it, the *Shooting Star*.

Well, wasn’t this some uncomfortable deja vu: a first-year witch presenting her with an incredible magical artifact, except that this time it had happened without any prompting. She resisted the urge to gulp, and smiled instead. “Yes?”

“You’re investigating Amanda O’Neill’s disappearance?” the girl said, out of breath. When Croix nodded, the girl drew herself up straighter. “I’m Tiff Vander— *Tiffany* Vandergard, and I’m here to help! If that’s okay with you, Professor Meridies.”

Croix smiled. “Please, I’m a *cool* teacher. Call me Professor Croix.”

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Oh, *hell* yes.

Tahiti didn’t have bad weather this time of year. At least, not if you paid a sufficient amount to a local witch—when magic was involved, meteorology could be more prescriptive than predictive. And boy howdy, Amanda had sufficient amounts.

“Another double chocolate oreo milkshake with whipped cream, Miss O’Grady?” said the valet from her hotel.
She said, “Make it two,” and burped hugely, but didn’t otherwise move a muscle. She was exactly where she needed to be: in a bikini, on a reclining chair, under the sun, on a black-sand beach. Oh, and with about fifty thousand dollars stuffed in her boots, off to the side of the chair. (She’d gotten the money from an ATM in Alaska. She wasn’t some kind of moron who’d access the family accounts somewhere she actually wanted to stay.)

Amanda briefly opened her eyes, looking up at the brilliant blue sky—more muted through her sunglasses, but still very nice—and then closed them. She smacked her lips, feeling the flecks of milkshake sticking on them and how the breeze seemed to tickle those flecks.

This was the life. The valet returned with both her milkshakes, she grabbed a hundred dollar bill from her boot to toss at him, and he went his merry way. And she grabbed one of her milkshakes without looking, grasping with one hand until she touched the cool glass, and she brought it to her lips and drank deeply.

Man, this was the life.

...

Holy shit, this was boring.

Andrew, Frank, and the blond one walked down the hallway, deeply engaged in conversation, abjectly failing to notice the droid hovering above them.

“Is this okay?” Tiff asked, standing next to Professor Meridies’ hologram as they watched the feed from another of her droids.

“Define okay.”

“Um... legally? Morally?”

“Don’t know about legally.” Professor Meridies smirked. “But they’re in a public hallway—correction, a private hallway at a school where I’m employed. If they didn’t want people to listen, they could have talked about this somewhere else. Zoom in and increase volume,” she said, in a tone of command. The feed did as ordered, and now Tiff could hear the three boys.

“—and I’d be able to show you the book to prove it if that white-haired witch hadn’t pilfered it from my very hands,” the blond one was saying, “but she’s almost certainly got some sort of seven league boots. That’s how she disappeared, and she could keep disappearing. She could be anywhere on Earth!”

“And for my part, I had a great time talking with Lotte!” Frank let out a happy sigh. “We’re doing lunch and a movie next weekend. I think we might be ready to move to the next level soon! What do you guys think I should wear?”

The droid was behind the boys, so it was difficult for Tiff to be sure, but it looked like the blond one was grinding his teeth. “Frank, if you spent the whole time planning a date with a witch, I swear to God —”

“Oh yeah, did I mention my uncle’s a banker?” Frank held up a phone. “He told me she pulled
money out of her bank account at a machine in Juneau, Alaska. So seriously, the full suit, or something more casual? Because I’ve got a really nice polo I’ve been looking for an excuse to try….”

Blond boy took a deep breath. “All right. She’s in Alaska. Can we go?”

“We are going,” Andrew said from between the two of them. “To Tahiti, because that’s where she is. I’ve got information from her family.” He held up the orange folder he’d been given.

“But—the ATM access happened in Juneau!”

“You’ve met her, Louis.” Andrew said. “Don’t you recall?

Louis, the blond one, turned his head to the side, as if away from some unpleasant sight. “I… suppose we have encountered one another. Once.”

“She has boots that will let her go anywhere on Earth. Does she seem like the kind of person who’d use them to stay in one of the coldest, least pleasant cities on Earth? They hardly get any sunlight this time of year.”

“All right, all right, I understand what you mean. She’s trying to throw us off her trail.” Louis sighed. “But having met her… I’m unsure whether she’d enjoy Tahiti any more.”

“Okay,” Professor Meridies said, “that’s enough.” She waved her hand, and the feed vanished. “So. How quickly can you get to Tahiti?”

Tiff frowned. “I… don’t know what this broom’s top speed is.”

“No time like the present to find out.” They’d been standing in front of a window: Professor Meridies took out her wand and waved it, and a jet of light shot from her droid, causing the shutters to glow and open. “Oh, and before I forget. Metamorphie Vestesse.”

The droid rotated and shot out another beam, this time at Tiff. Tiff flinched, and then found that her simple school uniform had been transformed into a showy, snow-white number with matching hat. “It’ll keep you safe from wind pressure,” Professor Meridies said. She spread her arms wide. “Now go! Carpe diem! Or carpe calceamenta, I suppose.”

“Calce… Amanda?”

“It actually means ‘seize the shoes’. But yes, that does work out nicely.”

Tiff laughed a little at that. “Thank you, Professor Meridies!”

“Croix, please.” Professor Meridies’ smile went a bit wan. “And don’t thank me. I’m just doing what I have to.”

Tiff held the Shooting Star in front of her. She heard a whisper from it: “Find me… rest of me…”

“I’m doing it!” she whispered, and swung her leg over the side. “All right. Let’s go!”

And by gosh, she went. The school surroundings disappeared, and she found herself face-first in a cloud for an instant, and then above the clouds, with nothing over her head but the sun and a sky full of blue.

She felt like her breath had gone away, all at once. She’d flown before. She’d even flown on the Shooting Star before. But this was…. She looked down just in time to see herself crossing over the
English border, headed toward France. This was freedom, freedom from chains she’d never thought of. Chains like gravity, or national boundaries, or space and time.

She laughed, and she kept laughing, pausing only to whoop. She even dared to take her hands from their grip on the Star, and send them skyward, clenched in fists of victory.

“This is what you made?” she yelled, looking straight ahead. “You made this, Scarlette? How did you ever get anything done? How did you stop yourself from just flying forever?”

She whooped again.

“Find me….” came the little whisper from the handle. Scarlette’s face flickered briefly into being. “Tiffany… please….”

“Right, yes! I hear you.” Tiff laughed again. “Tahiti. We’re going.”

She focused. It was a little hard to tell, but she seemed to be heading west. In maybe an hour, although that might be underestimating her speed, she might be at the Pacific coastline. Tahiti was in the Pacific, right?

She frowned. Where in the Pacific, again?

And then she shrugged. It couldn’t be that hard to find.

It was late at night at Luna Nova. Tiff stumbled through her dorm room door. “Uuuuuugh.”

Mani looked up from the big bed. “Tiff! You’ve been gone all day!” She turned around and hissed, “Char! She’s back!”

“Whuh?” Char looked to be half-comatose on the bottom bunk. “Uh.”

“You would not believe how big the Pacific Ocean is,” Tiff said, stumbling forward. “And it’s not like there’s landmarks.” She took the Shooting Star in her hand and propped it up against a wall. “Oh, you’re going to see some ocean, keep going for about five minutes until you see this patch of ocean, then turn right and from there it’s straight forward until you see the next bit of ocean!”

She let out a grunt, and started forcing her tired arms to grab the ladder to the top bunk.

“That sounded like a laugh,” Mani said.

“It was a grunt,” Tiff said, and let out another one.

“You’re laughing!” Mani let out an angry hrrrn sound. “You fly off without saying where you’re going, and you’re gone all day, and you come back now, and you’re laughing! And you were over the Pacific Ocean?”

“I mean….” Okay, now that it had been pointed out, Tiff did notice that there seemed to be a smile on her face, despite both her exhaustion and her best efforts to tamp it down. She gave up on it, letting the grin widen. “Sure. I’m laughing.”

“I thought this was a serious rescue mission?”
“It is! But…. ” Tiff struggled to the top bunk and flopped onto her bed, but made the effort to prop herself up on one side so she could look Mani in the eye. “I know I’m supposed to take it seriously. But do you know how incredible the Shooting Star is?”

“If I said yes, you would still tell me, so I think I will be honest and say no.”

Tiff ignored the sardonicism. “The thing is, most brooms look the same—to the laywitch. And that’s because they’re all created to try to fit the ideal standard of broom-making, the theoretical best broom you can make with enchanted wood and fibers. If a broom matches perfectly, or gets very very close, it’s A grade. A less perfect but very good broom is B grade, less than that is C grade, and so on. My previous broom was A grade, whereas most of the brooms the school gives out are a low D.”

“And mine?” Mani asked.

Tiff frowned, her broom-reverie marred by the thought of that thing Mani rode. “At a guess… somewhere below Z?”

Mani pouted.

“But! Here’s the thing!” Tiff leaned forward, cantilevering herself over the end of the bed. “The Shooting Star isn’t like any other broom. It’s been a mystery to every broom-maker and broom-theorist since it was created. It’s in a league of its own—a class of its own. The Shooting Star is the one, and only, S-grade broom.”

“That does sound pretty cool,” Mani said, shrugging.

“Pretty cool? It was the most incredible thing I’ve ever done in my life!” Tiff flopped back onto her back, letting herself remember the exhilaration. “Flying the Shooting Star the first time was like nothing I’d ever done, and then flying it this time was a step beyond that! I’ve never gone so fast, never seen so much! I’ve never felt so… so everything!” She gesticulated wildly. “I always loved flying but… but even if I’d hated it, I’d love it now! That was wonderful! Oh, I feel like I could go on for—”

“Oh my gawwwwd,” Char groaned from below her, “please stop talking. Need sleep.”

Tiff grunted, and thumped a fist on her mattress. “Have you no adventure in your soul, Char? No compass in your heart that points you at the horizon?”

Mani chuckled from her bed, drawing Tiff’s attention back her way. “All right. I’m glad you had fun. But…. ” She leaned over the side of her bed away from Tiff, and when she came back up, she held a thick sheaf of papers. “This is all the classwork you missed. And…. ” She held up another, thicker sheaf. “The homework. So… you may have picked a bad day for it. And Char’s right about sleep.”

Tiff sighed. “Fine.” But as she rolled over, away from Mani, she smiled.

“GPS.”

That voice was so slurred and lethargic it was almost unrecognizable as human. “What was that, Char?” Tiff said.

“Get GPS. Dipstick.”

“Rude. But… yes.” Tiff frowned. That would mean finding Amanda… sooner. Which was good,
“Fight Club! Amanda O’Grady’s Fight Club, step on up!”

It had been about three days. Three days in the happiest place on the planet. Amanda was ready to rip her hair out.

Fortunately, she’d settle for ripping out other people’s. “Fight Club!” she yelled, twirling her giant handmade sign and stepping toward some muscular young men lying on towels. “Step right up, ladies and gentlemen, ‘cuz contrary to popular belief you do get to talk about it! Join Fight Club, it’s a hundred dollars!”

“Girl, leave us alone,” said one of the dudes.

“Yeah. Why would we pay a hundred dollars to get in a fight?”

“What? No.” Amanda held out a Benjamin Franklin. “You get a hundred dollars to participate. If you beat me, it goes to a thousand. Fight Club?”

The first of the boys snorted and looked away, but the second one shrugged and stood up. “Sure, this’ll pay for drinks tonight.” Amanda tossed him the bill and he snatched it from the air, and then entered a fighting stance with it still in his fist. “Ready?”

Amanda smirked and dropped the sign. “Whenever you are.”

“Okay, I admit,” Professor Croix’s hologram said, wearing some wholly unnecessary welding goggles as a pair of robotic arms from her droid went to work. “A GPS would probably have been a good idea to start with.”

Tiff watched, sitting with Professor Croix in a corner of the cafeteria, as the droid’s arms attached a GPS to the Shooting Star. “Easy there, Scarlette,” Tiff whispered, rubbing the staff as if stroking the fur of a skittish pet. “It’s okay, it’s not a chain. Erm, Professor Meri—Professor Croix, why are we doing this in the cafeteria and not your office?” It was kind of awkward, even if they were in the corner: Tiff looked around and saw people glancing her way every few seconds or so. Also, she was worried the table was going to catch on fire.

“My office is… a bit of a walk.” Croix’s shoulders moved noncommittally. One of her hands was taking chopstickfuls of ramen into her mouth from a ramen cup in her lap. She gulped and continued, “Specifically, the top of the New Moon Tower. And I’m working on something else in there right now as a backup, something that’s occupying all the space.” Croix’s other hand was manipulating a video game controller with the confidence of a virtuoso pianist. Sparks flew.

“Backup?”

“If this doesn’t work out. Not that I don’t have complete faith in you and so on.”
The words were distracted, but Tiff was grateful for them anyway. “Okay,” she said, and she kept on petting her broom, because some of the sparks were landing on it.

“And there,” Croix said, whipping up her goggles and releasing the controller; the droid arms retreated into the disc, leaving the Shooting Star with one aerodynamically-shaped screen attached to it. “Operation Carpe Calceamenta, take two.” The cafeteria window opened with a burst of light from the droid, and that got even more people’s attentions. “With these directions, you and her should be back in time for your next class.”

“Sure, of course,” Tiff frowned. “Although… if it takes a little longer that’s okay too, right?”

“As your teacher, I should probably discourage you from skipping class, but….” Croix shrugged. “I’m a cool teacher. I’ll write you a note.”

“Thanks! Um….” Tiff tapped her school uniform. “Protective clothes?”

“Of course. Metamorphie vestesse.”

The swirl of transformation surrounded her again, and this time Tiff kept her eyes open. Her simple school uniform billowed, as if caught in the mother of all gales, and then the simple blue color washed out of her vest, leaving it a white that shone like gold. Tiff beamed, looking around herself at the new duds, then nodded at Professor Croix. “Thanks!” She hopped on the broom. “Let’s go, Scarlette!”

Wow, okay. Turned out being buff didn’t actually mean squat in a fight.

“You agreed to this,” Amanda said, staring down at the man as he gasped on the sand. “We all heard it. Enjoy your drinks.”

She grunted and turned around, picking up the Fight Club sign. There was supposed to be… triumph, she guessed? Something, some sort of emotional reaction. Instead she just felt… empty. Like a building that had been abandoned for so long that the lights were all off, and chunks of the ceiling were collapsing, and black mold was growing all over the walls.

She snorted, because Christ, that sounded edgy.

“So is that offer available to anyone?”

Amanda looked up. Then she took a few steps back, and then, realizing he was staring at her, she planted the sign in the ground and leaned on it and said, “Andrew Hanbridge.” And then rolled her eyes, as dismissively as she possibly could. “I knew you were a rich prick, but come on, man. Wearing a suit to the beach?”

There, maybe she wouldn’t look like a deer in the freaking headlights. What the hell was Andrew Hanbridge doing here?

“I haven’t had time to change.” He snorted. “And come on. You’ve heard of the pot and the kettle, haven’t you, Miss O’Neill?”

Amanda glowered, still leaning on the sign.
He snorted again, and rather than being derisive it sounded amused. Well, to Amanda it still sounded derisive, but she got the sense he wasn’t doing it on purpose. “I’ve got to admit. Of all of Akko’s friends, I wouldn’t have figured you for the richest. I imagine that was intentional?” he asked.

“Back off.”

“You’ve met Akko. Do you honestly think she cared when she found out—”

She stood up and advanced upon him, leaving the sign behind. “You’re about to join Fight Club,” Amanda said, “and you’re not even gonna get paid for it. Back. Off.”

He stopped. The gentle waves of low tide were the only noises on the beach.

“So,” Amanda said. She dropped her arms that had raised to her chest level without her even thinking about it. Listlessly, she turned around and aimed a tired kick at the sign, toppling it facedown onto the black sand. “Family put you up to this?”

“My father did assign me to this role, yes.” Andrew sighed. “Though I get the impression that it’s as much to keep me away from actual government as—”

Amanda held her hands out, cutting him off as she stared him down. “My family. Did my family put you up to this? I mean, my grandmother’s gotta be how you found me, right?”

“To be fair, you aren’t using much of a pseudonym. Amanda O’Grady? Really?”

“But she is how you found me.”

“Yes.”

Amanda snorted. She turned around and started walking. Not exactly away from him, just… in a direction. When he followed, she didn’t mind. “She gave you instructions in those clean little orange folders, right? And she didn’t even tell you not to say it was her? That’s gotta be, like, the least patronizing she’s ever been in my entire life.” She even laughed. “I’m touched! Almost, anyway.”

“You… knew they were orange folders? Orange, specifically?”

“Wow, I must be a fortune teller too.” Amanda took in a breath, held it, and walked over to the water. She sat down in the surf, letting it run over her, letting the slow rhythm cool her off. “She’s the head of the family, so what she says goes. Except she doesn’t… say it. She has servants send out these nice little orange folders—I don’t know why they’re always orange, I guess she’s into the color—and everyone always does exactly what the folders say. It’s like… like the folders are keys….” She held out her hand, turning an imaginary key in a lock made of air. “And she puts them into people like she’s winding up a music box, and there they go.”

She waved at him. “Water’s great, by the way. Come on, rich boy, enjoy yourself for once in your life.”

“I’m… not dressed for it.” Andrew was staying well away from the surf.

She laughed, bitterly. “Look at you dancing, you pretty little ballerina on your pretty little stand! Of course, can’t let you get dirty, it might lower the resale value.” She turned away from Andrew, staring out at the setting sun. “She’s got you wound up. And it sounds like your dad has a key in you too.”
She laid back, letting the water run over her hair. “Not me, though. I decided years ago. No one gets to put a key in me.”

The wave washed back over her, as if trying weakly to pull her toward the sea.

“Huh. That sounds like a great way to stay locked up forever.”

Amanda groaned. “Oh, you jackass. I had a perfectly good metaphor there and now you’re just ruining it.”

“No, really, I—okay, you know what? Fine. Fine.” Amanda heard footsteps, and then she looked up with surprise as Andrew walked into the surf, and with even more surprise as he sat in the wet sand next to her. “Okay, now can we talk?”

“Hey, look at you!” Amanda sat up, scooped a handful of wet sand from her side, and chucked it right into the middle of his jacket. “Not afraid to get dirty!”

“It’s… it’s fine, I have twenty.” He sucked in a breath, and from what Amanda could see, he was visibly resisting the urge to remove the sand as it ran down his front. “Well, all right, now I have nineteen. Look.”

He turned to face her. “I know I don’t come across as the most… free-spirited person. And I’m not. I used to do whatever my father did. Say whatever he said, think whatever he thought. And then, well, I met Akko and she made a bit of an ass out of me.”

Amanda snorted, bowing her head a little. “I wish I’d been there for that. Apparently you looked hilarious.” Snickering, she reclined back onto the sand. “And now you’re gonna tell me that Akko saved you from your stuffy family, and taught you to think for yourself, and yadda yadda yadda she’s such an angel. Everybody looooooooves Akko.”

“That’s… one way to look at it. Or maybe she just stuck her key in me.”

Amanda glanced over.

“Everyone’s influenced by someone, Amanda. Even you—”

“No me!”

He stared at her. “Yes, you. And me, obviously. But—”

“No, really, not me.” She glared at him, but forced a laugh so he wouldn’t take it too seriously.

“Would you just let me—”

“I would not!” Amanda flicked another spray of water at him, and he flinched away with a grunt of exasperation. She laughed. “Must suck for you. You think your life’s on rails and, what, you’re not even trying to jump the tracks? That’s the saddest most defeated thing I’ve ever even heard of.”

“Do you know what happens when a train actually derails?” Now he was finally glaring back: at last she’d put a chink or two into that armor. “People get hurt, travel gets delayed, and it’s a terrible situation all around! And do you know what you’ve done by derailing your metaphorical train?”

He lifted a finger and jabbed it at her. “Amanda, your friends are worried. Akko, Diana, Constanze, Jasminka. Everyone. They don’t know where you are, and they don’t know if you’re
safe, and they don’t know when you’re coming home. Is that what you want for them?”

Amanda glanced away, looking instead at the sunset over the water. It was way easier to stare at the giant ball of eye-hurting fire in the sky than to meet Andrew’s gaze, and she gritted her teeth when she realized it.

Andrew groaned. “And of course, I had to come all the way out here, not that I expect you to care about that. The point I’m trying to make is that chaos isn’t always good—order isn’t always bad. As for me? As long as I’m helping people, I don’t mind who’s telling me to do it.”

In her peripheral vision, Amanda saw some movement, and she craned her neck up to see that Andrew had reached out his hand to her. “And I’m here to help right now. There’s a lot of people who want to see you come home safe, Amanda, not just your parents. And you don’t seem happy here either. Would you help me help them out?”

She sighed, rolled over onto her front, and pushed herself up. “Ugh, fine. I’ll put the boots back on, pop on home, let everyone know I’m fine. I can come back to Tahiti on the weekends.”

“Er. Yes, that’s… something like what we wanted you to—”

“Andrew!”

She recognized that voice. Her gaze shot up and she saw that… blond dude from Appleton whose ass she’d kicked, what was his name? Lester? And then her attention refocused, because held in his hands were her shoes. “I’ve got the seven-league boots!” he yelled. “Have you convinced her to come back to her family yet?”

Amanda’s teeth clenched so hard she felt like they might shatter. “Oh, you dickwaffle! ” she shouted, and leaped up to bolt at Lester.

“Oh, raring for a rematch?” Lester grinned, and dropped the shoes. In his other hand, he held a stick like a fencing sword. “Well, I assure you it’ll be different this time, Miss O’Ne—”

She ran inside his guard and kneed him in the balls. He was down for the count with a barfing noise.

“Amanda, wait!” She looked round and saw Andrew running toward her, his pants sopping wet from the surf. It looked hilarious, but she wasn’t laughing. She snatched the boots from the ground and sprinted. “What are you even going to do?”

“Go somewhere else!” Amanda hopped on one foot, awkwardly yanking the boot onto her other foot. “Somewhere where my grandmother doesn’t get to decide what I do! Somewhere where I get to stick it to her!”

“Stick it to her? By lying on a beach all day? Are you hearing yourself?” Andrew growled, and the noise seemed to be getting closer. She glanced behind herself, confirmed his approach visually, and redoubled her speed. “How does that accomplish anything?”

“Shove it!”

She yanked the other shoe on, then looked forward to see that a third boy—whose name she didn’t have any clue about, but he did have a sort of blond pompadour—had wandered into her way, almost as if by accident. He bent his knees and spread his arms wide. “Okay, Amanda,” he said, as she kicked one shoe angrily against the other, “if you’re trying to get away from us, you’re going the wrong—”
She’d taken her three steps. She vanished into a blur of motion, and reappeared at the hotel room she’d chosen. A minute later, she’d pulled on clothes and packed her suitcase, and she ran forward again.

And now, lights surrounded her. Monuments everywhere she looked. She groaned, and sagged against a building on a street corner, surrounded by neon and bright lights. Panting with the frenetic effort she’d just taken.

She was covered in sand and soaked with water, she’d probably need to get the muck out of her boots—but she was free. She closed her eyes, breathing out deeply, sagging where she sat.

Her grandmother loomed out of the darkness.

Amanda’s back bolted straight, her eyes snapped open, but—it was just her imagination. Obviously her grandmother wasn’t here, on the strip.

Except that she was everywhere. The woman was smart enough and powerful enough and rich enough that no matter where Amanda went, no matter where she tried to run, she’d be found. Andrew, or whoever the hell else dear old grandmother sent, would keep tracking her down.

Unless she accomplished something.

She curled her fingers into a fist. Maybe Andrew was right. Tahiti had been getting boring. “You like being a fortune teller so much, Granny?” she whispered. “Try doing it without a fortune.”

She clicked her heels, stood up, and walked off.

“—way,” Frank said, as Amanda vanished in front of him. He squinted. “Oh, that’s not good.”

“Frank!” Andrew yelled, catching up to him a few seconds later. “You let her get away!”

“I was going to catch her! It’s not like I knew she was about to disappear!”

“Urrrrgh,” said Louis, faintly audible from where he was sprawled on the ground, about a hundred yards away. Frank and Andrew hurried over, just in time for him to retch and let out another, “Urgh.”

“Are you all right?” Andrew held out his hand, and Louis managed to take it. “Do you need anything?”

“Yes.” Louis coughed a few times. “I need to stop getting brutalized by that girl.”

Frank smirked. “What, are you worried you’ll start to enjoy it?”

Louis blushed. Andrew didn’t want to think about the implications of that.

“So we failed,” Andrew said, and looked down at the ground. “I imagine the O’Neill Group won’t be happy. To say nothing of my father….”

“We tried.” Frank shrugged. “You came pretty close, I thought—”
He was interrupted by a buzzing noise, and Andrew looked round for the source. And then realized he’d left his phone in his pocket, and sat in the water. “Oh my goodness,” he said, and yanked it from his pocket—thankfully it still seemed to be working. And he’d gotten an email from the O’Neill Group.

*Congratulations, children.*

*Your failure is our success: Amanda has been pushed one step closer to making the decision she needs to make.*

*You’ll return from Tahiti in several days’ time; until then, I know you’ll enjoy a deserved vacation.*

Andrew read it aloud to Louis and Frank. “But… how did we….” He shook himself. “What does she mean, several days? We took a private jet. We can leave now.”

And then there was another ringtone, this one sounding like it had come from some rap song. Something about the police, and certain perverse actions a person should undertake toward them. “Oh, that’s Louis,” Frank said. “Louis, you wanna answer that?”

Louis groaned.

“How about I get it for ya,” Frank said, and slipped his hand into Louis’s pocket to grab his cellphone. “Hi, Jeeves, what’s up. Yeah, Louis is a bit indisposed right now. What’s up?” He frowned. “Mechanical issues? How long will it be to fix… unspecified, huh. What a coincidence. No, I don’t blame you. I guess it’s just one of those things… all right, see you later.”

He locked and pocketed the phone. “Wwwwwell, whaddya know. Stranded. Indefinitely until the engine’s fixed. Who wants drinks on me?”

Andrew found himself shivering, even in the warm sunset. Then a voice caught his attention.

“Seventeen point three seven two nine four degrees south, a hundred forty nine point three six four eight one degrees west! Made it!”

He looked up to see a white-blond witch in white robes, riding a red arrow of a broom, land upon the beach. She skidded for several feet, yelping as she slowed down from the fast landing. “Excuse me,” she yelled as she looked around, “has anyone seen a girl with, like, orange and yellow hair?”

The Green Team’s room wasn’t just dark. It was quiet.

Constanze *hated* the quiet. She hadn’t always: her whole life, she’d never contributed much in the way of filling it. And when she’d met Jasminka, although the girl wasn’t mute, she also wasn’t much of a talker. But usually *Amanda* was there. Amanda, who talked enough for three people, and filled the room with energy.

Amanda wasn’t there, and the room was quiet.

Constanze was seated in front of her computer screen, one which splashed blue-white light onto her face. In her headphones was some radio comedy show she wasn’t really listening to, with canned laughter at regular intervals. But just like the computer light wasn’t a substitute for real sunlight,
the speech bouncing off her ears couldn’t replace an actual conversation.

She squinted, rubbed her eyes, and leaned forward. She kept typing. Coding an instruction that would trawl the internet—witch internet and regular internet—for any image that matched Amanda. Looking for recent pictures that seemed to be matches for her. Alerting Constanze immediately once anything was found.

Constanze fought the urge to yawn, and hit the Run button.

All that happened was a popup with a big red sign. Error. Just like the last twenty times. Constanze gritted her teeth, then slammed her shaking fist into the desk. Several times. It wasn’t even loud, she didn’t have that much muscle, but she couldn’t exactly yell—so she had to do this instead.

Hands on her shoulders. She looked up to see Jasminka standing over her. “That’s enough, Constanze,” she whispered.

Constanze flicked her hand at Jasminka’s face, shrugged off her hands, and pulled her computer chair closer. And then the hands came back—or rather, one hand, grabbing the back of her collar and picking her up like a kitten.

She waved her fist angrily.

“I want to find her too. But between this and the transmitter, you haven’t gotten any rest. You need to sleep.”

Constanze stared at Jasminka. Every bit of tiredness in her seemed to be seeping into her eyes. They felt desiccated and raw, and absolutely ready to cry, except that she didn’t feel like she had the energy for it.

“I know.” Jasminka nodded. Even with her eyes closed, Constanze saw the bags under them. “Me too.”

She placed Constanze on her bed, then tucked the covers up over her. “Good night,” she said, and Constanze gave a weak thumbs up. Jasminka smiled back, but not a happy smile. A smile with a compiler error.

Constanze turned over, shut her eyes, and curled up. She fell into unhappy dreams.
Where in the World is Amanda O'Neill? (3)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Croix had her attention focused in the New Moon Tower, building her machine, when an alert came in. She looked up and frowned.

In the interest of being reachable, she had several drones doing circuits of the Luna Nova campus at all times: if a student wanted to talk to her, that student could send a message through one of those drones. And it looked like a student had just done so, right on the grounds outside by the Hecate statue.

Croix yawned, then sent her hologram over there, and looked into the smiling face of Tiff Vandergard. “So,” Tiffany said, “about that search.” She was already holding the Shooting Star.

Croix yawned again.

“Are you on a hammock?” Tiff said.

“It’s bedtime for me and lunchtime for you. Welcome to the magic of time zones.” She stretched out in a hammock that was about a hundred feet above the ground. Good thing witches weren’t predisposed to acrophobia. “What about the search? Did they find Amanda after the Tahiti fiasco?”

“Er… no….” Tiff forced on a smile. “But… could I go looking again? No one’s gonna be able to cover ground faster than me, as long as you give me those special robes! Not with…” She held out the Shooting Star and shook it a little, grinning with excitement. “My S tier broom!”

“Hmm… one moment.” Croix waved her hand, and a holographic menu appeared: information about the academy. She tapped her way through a few submenus until she found attendance records. Specifically, Tiffany’s. It was pretty simple: classes she made it to were in green, and classes she didn’t were bright red.

The last several days were showing up with a lot of red absences.

“Hm.” Croix frowned, took a few seconds, but waved the graph away. “All right. I’m a cool teacher, after all.” She smiled and waved her hand as if casting a spell, but without holding a wand: “Metamorphie vestesse.”

Tiff’s clothes went white again. “Thank you so much, Croix! You are a cool teacher!” And without further fanfare, she ran off, jumped onto the Shooting Star while keeping momentum, and escaped into the atmosphere.

Croix deactivated the feed and closed her eyes, smiling. She was a cool teacher.

These hole cards were terrible. A two of diamonds and a queen of spades—and the community cards weren’t any better. There was no way Amanda could win this round, and only an idiot would
try.

She grinned and shoved all of her chips forward. “All in.”

Her opponents, all of whom were a lot older and looked a lot more experienced than she was, regarded her quizzically—but not *that* quizzically. There was such a thing as a poker face, after all.

“What?” She laughed and put her hands behind her head, leaning her legs on the table. Was she showing off? Probably, yeah—with the suit and her hair spiked up, she was definitely the hottest guy there. “Come on, call my bluff. What do I have to lose besides, uh….” She did a quick bit of mental math. “One million dollars?”

_Come on_, she hissed inside her head, _call it._

Buzzing was the first thing Akko heard as she awoke.

A familiar, “*Mmm,*” was the second. Akko half-opened her eyes and saw Diana across from her in the bed, stirring as well. Judging by the amount of light in the room, Akko had no idea what time it was, but it couldn’t be a good time to be awake.

“It must be two in the morning,” Diana mumbled. She sat up, and Akko followed her gaze across the room. The orange folder that Diana had received from the O’Neills was glowing faintly and buzzing stridently. Diana sighed out a yawn, or yawned out a sigh, then got out of bed and crossed the room to the folder.

When she opened it, the buzzing stopped, but the light increased somewhat, at least for a few seconds. Diana shielded her eyes, then dropped her hand and looked. “The instructions are here,” she said. “It says… Las Vegas? And I’m to go alone.”

“Whaaaaat,” Akko said, pushing herself up and rubbing her eyes.

Diana jumped. “Akko. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t. It was that… dumb folder.” Akko flapped her hand. “Did you say *alone*?”

“Yes.” Diana closed the folder.

“That’s _dumb_ , come back to _bed_.”

Diana sighed and crossed to her closet. She opened it and removed her traveling clothes, which Akko thought looked a lot like her horse-riding clothes but Diana insisted they were different, and she started putting them on over her nightclothes. “I’ll be back.”


“Unlike Tahiti, Las Vegas is within broom distance of a leyline. It won’t be more than an hour and a half each way. I’ll be back before sunrise—”

“No, hold on, *stop.*” Akko pushed herself out of bed, wearing one of Diana’s borrowed nightshirts
Diana had insisted on that level of propriety during their nighttime snuggles) and hurried over. “This doesn’t feel right,” she said, holding the shoulder of Diana’s jacket.

Diana didn’t respond, but she also didn’t walk out.

“Like… we’re great together. We could totally convince her to come back if we went together. Why doesn’t that folder want us to?”

“Amanda’s grandmother is a fortune teller. Presumably she thinks I’ll have a better chance if I go alone—”

“Baloney! We’re unstoppable when we’re together! If she wanted Amanda back she’d send us—send us both.” Akko tried to stifle a yawn. “She sent Andrew and it didn’t work. Maybe she doesn’t want it to work.”

Diana sighed. “I don’t know, Akko. Fortune telling is so rare, and most fortune tellers don’t write down how it works—they don’t want to share the secret. But maybe this is the best she can do.”

“I don’t think it is.” Akko clasped Diana’s hand with her other hand, as much for support as anything. She was so tired. “Something else is… is going on. There’s got to be some reason Amanda hates her, right? Let me come with you. We can do this…. She breathedin heavily, and yawned heavier. “We can do this to… together….”

Diana squeezed her hand, but then let go. “Akko, what Amanda needs now is someone who understands what she’s going through, and someone who’ll be able to stay awake long enough to talk to her. Right now, that’s not you—that’s me.” She gently removed Akko’s other hand from her shoulder, and walked her back over to the bed. “You need this sleep more than I do.”

“But… but….” Akko yawned again, and really wished she could stop, but it was so late….

Diana looked tired too, tired behind her eyes, but she wasn’t yawning. “I’ll be back with Amanda before you know it, Akko. Good night.” She released Akko, letting her fall into bed. As Akko’s senses drifted away, she saw Diana pulling on boots and grabbing a box from the bedside table, and then sleep washed over her like fog rolling in.

“What do you mean, you fold?”

The other players watched Amanda as impassively as before. But they kept tossing their cards into the muck, regardless.

“I’ve got nothing!” Amanda slammed her hands into the table. “I’ve had nothing for the past five hands! Just… take my money already!”

It was too late. They had all folded. Amanda watched in horror as an Everest of chips was pushed her way. “Freaking… keep them!” Amanda jolted to her feet and ran away, across the casino, before anyone could tell her different.

There was an ATM in the corner. She sucked in a breath, shoved her card in, and withdrew another
hundred thousand dollars from the O’Neill account she could access: it came out in a five-inch stack of hundreds. She cast her eyes about for somewhere she could blow some of the money, some way to burn this ridiculous fortune—

Slot machines. Perfect. Those things were designed to steal your money—Constanze had once shown her the code behind making them unfair. Regaining her smirk, Amanda shove some money into the nearest one and yanked the lever.

Seven. Seven. Seven. Seven. Seven.

She took a step back, as money started spewing out from the slot machine like it was a defeated enemy in a video game. “No,” she said, “no you don’t—”

She went to the next one. Same result. The one after that, same. And on and on, down the row, until the floor was covered with a line of money. She snarled, whipped out her wand, and ran along the line, picking all of the money up and conjuring a sack around it. Then she went for the door.

She passed the main desk as she went, and the concierge was sitting there. “Hey, Jeeves,” she spat, “you’ve got a bit of a problem with your machines.”

“On the contrary, miss.” Jeeves smiled. “They’re working just as designed. The O’Neill stamp of quality would demand no less.”

Amanda felt the blood draining from her face. “The what stamp of quality?”

“It’s actually an interesting piece of history.” His smile remained professional. “The matriarch of the O’Neill family, Amalthea O’Neill, financed the building’s construction in 1954, making it one of the oldest in the—”

So much for the blood draining from her head: now Amanda heard it pounding in her ears. She’d chosen this place at random. At random! There was no way—it couldn’t be—

She ran out of the building, and looked at the big name on the front that she hadn’t bothered to glance at before. The Music Box.

“No!” Amanda yelled. She turned away and ran across the street, unconsciously dodging cars and hopping barriers, until she reached the lake on the other side. With a roar of anger she hurled the sack of cash down into the water, and then jabbed her wand at it. “Exustio!” It burst into flames.

Amanda panted long, harsh breaths, returning her wand to her pocket. She’d run right into their hands again. Right into one of her grandmother’s stupid games, set up before she was even born, just so Amanda could dance inside this goddamned music box—

“Is that the best thing you could think of to do with that money?”

Her gaze shot up, and then she turned. A figure stood under a tree, in relative darkness in this city of bright lights, and most of the illumination on her was from the burning money: crackling and flickering. But that face—that stupid cabbage hair—was unmistakable.

Amanda growled, but then forced a chuckle. “Of all the flunkies she could have followed up with, Granny chose Diana Cavendick. The poorest kid in the world who still lives in a castle.” Okay, that was pretty funny. She let out another laugh, this time for real. “I hope Granny’s at least paying you good money for running around on her leash. Or were you hoping to scrounge some of that?” She waved at the money.
Diana sighed. “I wasn’t thinking about it that way. You could have helped a lot of people with that.” Her face remained as impassive as it freaking ever did. “Was it supposed to make a dent in the O’Neill fortune?”

“Now you’re getting it.”

“I actually can’t get why you’d do something so pointless. You know this isn’t a drop in the ocean of your family’s finances.” Diana stared. “You could burn money aimlessly for a hundred years and it would help no one.”

“Well, why not help yourself?” Amanda gestured widely at it. “Come on, maybe you can grab some before it burns up. You deserve it! Cuz whatever she’s paying you….” She pulled out her wand and pointed it at Diana, as if cracking a whip. “It’s not nearly enough to be worth a fight with me.”

It was hard to tell in the flickering light, but—yup, Diana was definitely rolling her eyes. “Why in the name of witchcraft would I want to start a fight?”

“Because you’re definitely here to try to convince me to do what Mommy and Daddy and Granny are saying. And there’s no way that’s happening without a fight.”

Diana sighed and rubbed her temples. “Amanda, it might be evening for you, but it’s four in the morning for me. I promise I’m not here to fight.”

“Good.” Amanda turned around, clicked her heels, walked two steps—

Her feet were encased in brambles, and her wand flew from her hand and into Diana’s. “But I am going to talk to you,” Diana said, still sounding as tired as before. She waved her wand some more, a wand that Amanda hadn’t even noticed her taking out.

Amanda couldn’t walk another step. “You—you just said—”

“That wasn’t a fight.”

More brambles grew from the grass, flickering with the green light of Diana’s magic, forming two chairs and a table between them. There weren’t any thorns that Amanda could see, and that was good: one of the chairs was under her, and as the tabletop grew toward her midriff, she was forced to sit down. It wasn’t too uncomfortable, except for the fact that every neuron in Amanda’s brain was screaming that she wanted out.

Diana sat into the other chair with none of her usual grace. “Anything to drink?” she said, as a teapot appeared above the table, flanked by teacups on floating saucers. It poured what had to be some really ritzy tea into the cup nearest Diana.

“How about some nice scalding tea,” Amanda muttered, and then she shouted, “so I can throw it into your freaking eyes! Let me go!”

“Enjoy your water.” The teapot turned around and poured a clear stream into Amanda’s cup, and then both cups landed as the pot disappeared. Diana took a drink from hers, set it down, and began, “Amanda, I understand what—”

Amanda tossed the contents of her cup into Diana’s face.

Diana blinked, flinched, and then sighed. “That’s fair.” She wiped her face off, not bothering with her dripping shirt, and said again, “Amanda, I understand what you’re going through.”
“You’ve got the people skills of a freaking… sociopathic bridge troll, Cavendick. You don’t understand what anyone’s going through. Let me go.”

“Really?” Diana’s eyes narrowed. Her next words had an edge to them under the fatigue. “You think you’re the only one who dislikes her family?”

Amanda didn’t answer except by narrowing her eyes.

“You should meet my aunt Daryl. Or my cousins, Maril and Merrill. And yes, surprisingly, they are different people.” Diana leaned forward onto the table. “They’ve done their utmost to disparage me for my entire life. To insult me, to destroy everything I care about. Even now, when I’m trying to help our family, to help them, they haven’t improved. How do you think that childhood was like, after my parents were gone?”

Diana’s temple was throbbing: she took a deep breath. “But let me ask you. Did I ever throw a tantrum and run away from the people who cared most—”

“Okay, shut the hell up.”

Amanda slammed both hands onto the table, and didn’t regret it even as the brambles pricked her palms. Diana recoiled back a bit. “Don’t kid yourself into thinking we’re the same, Diana, and that’s not just because I could buy your manor for pocket change. You love your family.”

“I assure you, I hold no great affection for—”

“Not those dicks, sure, they suck.” Amanda flapped her hand to silence Diana. “But I’m talking about your family, not the losers you happen to live with—the whole Cavendick shebang. Starting with your, uh, bazillion-greats great grandmother. Who was she again?”

Diana’s lips were tight, unwilling to help Amanda along to her point. That was okay: Amanda could be a solo act. “Oh, that’s right,” she said with a tone of exaggerated surprise, “Beatrix freaking Cavendish! Olde-with-an- E Witch, famous healer, helped found our freaking school — what’s not to love? And your mom was great while she was around, right, and so was your dad, wasn’t he? You’ve got great family coming out your stuck-up ears!”

She let out a laugh, then a sigh, as her energy wound down. “You’ve got something good to hold onto. Wanna know where my family starts?”

Diana leaned forward. “I’m told your grandmother made her wealth on the stock market.”

“My granny made her wealth looting the corpse of the stock market.” Amanda bared her teeth. “She’s old as balls, remember? She grew into her psychic powers at the end of the nineteen twenties. Remember what happened back then?”

“The…” Amanda watched with glee as Diana’s eyes widened. “You don’t mean the Great Depression?”

“I do mean the Great Depression. She saw it coming, psychic powers and everything. She didn’t, like, do anything to help. She just did some complicated stock market bullcrap and bet against all the stocks that fell, and made out like a bandit. My family got rich off human misery.”

Her hands curled into fists, and her nails dug deeper into her skin than the brambles. “And that never stopped. She treats people like dirt—like machines. The people she knows, the people who work at the businesses she owns, everyone. Like their only job is to do exactly what she wants. My folks are scared shitless of her, they do whatever she says! They’re as bad as she is, and they’re
trying to turn me into another one of them!

She tried to stand up, but just banged her knees on the underside of the table. Her teeth gritted at the pain. “I don’t have any noble lineage like you, Diana. I crawled out of scum, that’s what I’m made of, but I am not crawling back. Let me go.” She hated that her voice caught on the last word.

Diana looked up at her. For a moment, it looked like she might… actually sort of get it. But her expression hardened. “Why now?”

“What?”

“You could have run away any time. And yes, I know you only recently got the shoes, but you’re a witch. You have a broom. So why now?”

Amanda’s teeth were gritted. “And I’m guessing you don’t wanna let me out until you’ve got answers?” She crossed her arms. “What the hell makes you think you’re entitled to that? That’s personal shit!”

“Because it might enable me to help you.”

“Oh, is that what you were doing? I thought you were harassing me on dear old Granny’s orders.”

Now it was Diana’s turn to grit her teeth in frustration. Good. It felt nice to have a little control of the situation, even if she couldn’t move. “Amanda, if you would just listen to me—”

A flicker of orange and black in the corner of her vision.

Amanda clapped a hand over Diana’s mouth. “Stop talking.” She squinted. There was something on the roadway, something distant: behind Diana but well within Amanda’s field of vision. She leaned forward as much as she could.

Diana yanked Amanda’s hand from her mouth. “We are in the middle of a conversation—”

“Shut up and turn around.” Amanda jabbed her finger past Diana. “Tell me that you aren’t seeing this. Black vans, orange A’s on the sides, really fancy.” Her voice was a hell of a lot more desperate than she ever wanted it to sound while talking to Diana. “Tell me that you aren’t seeing this!”

Diana turned around in her seat. She waved her wand, muttered something, and a pair of opera glasses appeared at the end. She held them to her eyes, surveying the lit-up road along the water. She flinched, just a little.

It was all the confirmation Amanda needed. “No,” she groaned, “they’re using you to keep me here while they get the jump on me. They’re gonna drag me back to Granny and I’m gonna be stuck doing what they want for the rest of time.” She’d say ice was running through her veins, but ice would have been warmer. “You need to let me out,” she hissed, grabbing at Diana’s sleeve, “you can’t let them get me!”

Diana sounded almost bored. “Amanda, I think you’re overreacting.”

And the sound of boredom, of dismissal, was what did it more than anything else—what made Amanda grab Diana’s still-wet shirt collar and yank her close. “Look me in the eye and tell me I’m overreacting.” She shook Diana roughly. “I know you think you know everything, Diana, but if you think I’m screwing around even a little bit about what they’ll do to me, then you’re even stupider than I thought. Let me go. Please.”
Diana stared back, eyes wide, staring into Amanda’s own. There was fear on her face, and Amanda was thankful for that, because she knew there had to be fear all over her own, too.

And yet she wasn’t—freaking— talking. And she wasn’t letting Amanda go. And the vans were getting closer. “Come on,” Amanda whispered, “even you can’t be this much of a dick! Please! Please.” She hated this. Hated begging for Diana’s help. But if it meant getting away from her family’s clutches, she’d goddamn lick Diana’s boots clean right here and now.

Finally, Diana’s eyes narrowed, and she raised her wand. The brambles around them started shifting, the table disappearing. Amanda felt movement around her feet and looked eagerly—that had to be Diana letting her go, right?—only to stare as the brambles gripped tighter around her left boot and pulled it from her foot. Then they grew in Diana’s direction. “I won’t have you vanishing and worrying everyone again,” Diana said, grabbing the boot in her left hand while her wand remained ready in her right. “Come on. We can evade them and I’ll take you back to Luna Nova.”

The brambles retracted into the ground, and Diana stood up as her seat vanished. Amanda stood too, with both feet finally free. “Great. Wand. Gimme.” She extended her hand, wiggling her fingers.

“When we’re back at the school.”

Diana wasn’t even looking at her: she was staring down the road, where the vans were waiting at a red light. They were closer now. Amanda didn’t want to look at how close they were, so she refocused on Diana and said, “Are you freaking serious?”

“I can protect you quite adequately myself.” Diana bent her knees slightly. “I locked up my broom at a nearby bike rack. Stay close to me, and we’ll be there in five minutes. Let’s move.”

She ran toward the still-busy road, whipping her wand down in two great slashes. “Hilaro,” she declared, and two things happened. A line of floating illusory STOP signs appeared in the road, effectively creating a crosswalk along the busy thruway, and the lights of the cars around them glowed brighter than any high beam—but only the lights facing toward the vans. Diana shielded her eyes with her arm and ran across, surrounded by the honking of cars and the little pop s of bulbs shattering at their own output.

Amanda ran behind. Maybe this would work out after all.

“We lost them!” came the squawk over the intercom. “The Cavendish kid did something with the lights and we lost them!”

The woman driving the van held the Talk button on her own intercom. “But we know where they’re going,” she said. “Fan out. Make noise. Hound them, but don’t get too close. This is all according to plan.”

She wore the dress of a housekeeper. On her skirt, matching the side of the van, was an ornate orange A.
They ran.

Diana held her wand in one hand, and Amanda’s wand and boot in the other. They sprinted down sidewalks and turned down sidestreets, getting closer and closer to the place in Diana’s mental map where she’d parked her broom. And then, every time, they would hear the shredding of tires, the shouting of voices, and Amanda yanked Diana’s arm and demanded that they change course, and so they would. Again and again, while Diana tried to keep her sense of direction.

It had been fifteen minutes, and Diana was exhausted, and her mental map was ripped to shreds. They stopped, panting, in an alley. “I just need a minute,” Diana wheezed, “just to remember where we’re going.”

“Just summon the damn broom! You’ve got a wand—hell, you’ve got two!” Amanda had always been more athletic: she panted too, but stood upright with her teeth bared.

“I obviously locked it up.” Diana planted her hand against the alley wall, supporting herself. “I can’t call it with magic.”

“Fuck. Fuck!” Amanda kicked the wall. “Fuuuuuck! They’re gonna find us.”

“I promise I won’t let them find us, we just need—”

Diana stopped talking, because Amanda wasn’t listening. She’d grabbed her own face, and it almost looked like she was trying to rip it off. “They’re gonna find us, and they’re gonna drag me back, and they’re gonna make me like her. I can’t stop it, I can’t even fucking do anything —” Her breaths were fast, her eyes were crazed, and her jaw was clenched so hard it looked fit to shatter.

“What—what does that mean?” Diana tried to take Amanda’s shoulder, but Amanda shoved her away. She pressed on regardless. “What do you mean, make you like her? Your grandmother?”

“She had a prophecy,” Amanda hissed, staring off into space. “I was just a kid. She brought me in just to scare me, who does that—who does that to a kid? What’s wrong with her?” Then she sank to the ground, still breathing fast. “And then she made a prophecy that I was gonna be like her in seven years. And that was almost seven years ago, and her prophecies are never wrong. Never ever ever.”

All Diana could do was stare.

She had never known Amanda all that well—she was more Akko’s friend than Diana’s—but it wasn’t like they’d never had adventures before. They’d shared mortal danger before, against that loan shark of a dragon and in the Forest of Arcturus and when confronting Croix’s Noir Missile. Through every piece of peril, Amanda’s devil-may-care attitude had remained a reassuring constant, as reliable as Akko’s optimism or Diana’s own quiet self-confidence.

Tonight, the only danger was that Amanda might reunite with her family, and she was more terrified than Diana had ever seen her. She was more terrified than Diana had ever seen anyone.

“What am I gonna do,” Amanda mumbled, back planted against the wall, hands still clawing at her face. Red marks were starting to show. “She’s gonna make a figurine out of me, what the hell am I gonna do….”
And with a start, Diana remembered. “I… I have something,” she said. This was good. This was a way she could help.

“You remember where your broom is?” Amanda stared at her, her hands losing some of their rictus-tension.

“This is something else.” Diana reached into her pocket and she pulled out a small box—the package she’d gotten from Amanda’s maid. “I was told… you might find this comforting, if you were in a bad way.”

“I… thanks…?” It seemed she was too confused for terror. Amanda took the package, mumbling, “What the hell is this thing anyway,” and opened it—

Amanda’s hands went slack. The box clattered to the ground.

Diana didn’t have time to think before her shoulders were in Amanda’s hands and her back was slammed against the wall. She saw stars as her head hit the brick, and as soon as they went away, Amanda’s face was all she saw. “What the hell,” Amanda hissed. Her eyes were wide, wild. “What the hell is wrong with you? Who gave you that!?”

“What?”

Amanda shook her against the wall, and Diana cried out. “Tell me!” Amanda yelled.

“I don’t—it’s just a music box, what’s wrong with—”

Amanda hauled back a fist, and Diana acted without thinking: “Paleis Capama!” she yelled, whipping out her wand. When Amanda’s fist shot out, it bounced off the wall of the bubble that surrounded her. “What is wrong with you?” Diana held her wand out and walked forward, and Amanda’s bubble hovered before her, Amanda struggling fruitlessly within. “I just got it from one of your maids, what’s the harm in that?”

“One of my—” Amanda let out a broken bark of a laugh. “I don’t—are you kidding me? Is that what she told you?”

“But a coldness was spreading through Diana’s chest, as if Amanda’s frenzied gaze were freezing her right in the heart. And it only got worse when Amanda spoke again. “I don’t have anyone in my house who looks out for me. They all look out for her, and one of them got to you and you believed her! She used you to get to me and you just—just let it happen! Look at it, you idiot!”

Amanda punched against the bubble again, but she was floating inside it and couldn’t get leverage.

Diana bent and picked up the music box, that had fallen out of its packaging. The top of the music box had swung open in the fall, and as she held it up to the light, she saw the dancer inside: a girl in an elegant ballerina’s dress, the kind Amanda would never wear in a million years—and with hair just like Amanda’s. A face just like Amanda’s/

She’s gonna make a figurine out of me.

The music box tumbled from Diana’s hand. She sucked in a shaky breath. “I’m sorry, I didn’t open it—I didn’t want to pry, but I didn’t think she was—”

“No, you didn’t think! Because you knew!” Fury and horror intermingled on Amanda’s face: her
teeth filled out an ugly grimace, but tears leaked from her eyes. “Just like the great Diana Cavendish knows everything! So why would she ever need to think?” She shot her hands out again.

“Listen,” Diana said, trying to keep her voice as steady as possible. “Calm down, and I promise I can help you. I promise I can—”

What was Amanda doing? She’d planted her hands on one side of the bubble, and her feet on the other, her body stretched out like a gymnast about to do a trick. And then, savagely, she kicked her single boot against her unbooted foot. “Amanda,” Diana started, “what are you—”

One step. Two steps, against the inside of the bubble, with her hands planted on the other end to give her leverage. In a flash of premonition, Diana realized what she was doing. Diana’s hand stretched out, she stepped forward, she screamed, “Amanda, don’t!”

Three steps.

Amanda vanished, and then a blinding pain struck Diana in the back of the head—a pain that felt like Amanda’s elbow smashing into her. She collapsed, gasping, and now she couldn’t see through the explosion of stars in her eyes. She could barely feel Amanda’s wand and other boot being taken from her limp grip, could barely hear Amanda’s words: “You can’t help me, Diana.”

Diana forced herself to look up. She could barely see, but there was Amanda’s silhouette. She wore both boots now, but limped as she walked—Diana knew the consequences of using seven league boots without wearing both, and could only imagine the consequences for this advanced pair. How willing was she to hurt herself, if this was a preferable alternative?

“Amanda,” she rasped, and the silhouette stopped. “I’m sorry.”

She saw a turning, and forced herself to look up. Amanda’s eyes shone in the Vegas lights, but she wasn’t crying. She seemed determined not to. “It doesn’t matter,” she whispered.

With a perfunctory heel-click and three steps, she was gone. Diana sank back to the ground, letting the grit and the dirt cover her face, letting the pain overtake her.

As soon as Amanda was away, she cried out in pain and stumbled back.

Her back hit the support of… some bridge, somewhere. She hadn’t had any destination in mind besides away, and this definitely qualified: the bridge stretched high over her head, and long over a dark expanse of water far larger than anywhere near Las Vegas could accommodate. There was a gentle lapping of waves against the shore, and the occasional sounds of cars far above. This place was safe.

But Amanda was not. “Son of a… mother…” She let out another stuttering cry of pain as she sank down into the dirt. As soon as she’d teleported with just one of the boots, she’d felt a flare of pain in her midsection, but she’d been able to push through it (as if she would ever let Diana see weakness, after that display). But now no one was here for Amanda to stay together for, so she whimpered as she looked down at her pant leg. It was red in a line that slashed along the front of
her thigh, and it hadn’t been red before. It hadn’t been warm and wet and burning, either.

She tore the pant leg away, hissing with pain as the fabric and wound got unstuck, and took a look at the gash that wound around her upper leg. She squirmed against the cold metal at her back, and pulled out her wand, and whispered a minor healing spell Jasminka had once used on her—then cried out as the skin burned even more painfully, knitting itself back together as she watched.

Within seconds it was done—or at least she’d done as much as she could: the shallow wound had been covered by a blotchy scab. And now there was really nothing else to do. No other distraction.

Amanda sank back against the pylon, and her body shook with quiet sobs. The sound was swallowed up in the white noise of the waves. “I don’t want to,” she whispered. “I don’t want to be like her. Please.” And that sound was swallowed up too.

Her hand curled into a fist, and she pounded on the pylon. Diana had said one smart thing, full of shit though she had been. You could burn money aimlessly for a hundred years and it would help no one, she had said. If Amanda wanted to bring her family down—and she needed to if she was ever going to find a second of peace—then she was going to need to think bigger.

She snarled, then shoved herself upright, heedless of the pain lancing up her leg. With a savage kick at her foot and another three steps, she was gone.

The light of morning was creeping through Diana’s room, and Akko had given up on any hope of salvaging a good night’s sleep, when the door opened. Diana staggered through seconds later, broom and wand in hand. Diana never staggered.

Hannah and Barbara, who still shared the same room with Diana, were at her sides in a flash before Akko could even react. “Diana!” Hannah said.

“You look exhausted,” Barbara said, right after with no break: it was as if one person was talking through two mouths. “Can we get you anything?”

“Breakfast?”

“Coffee?”

“A hot bath?”

Diana waved them off. Then her eyes found Akko, and Akko saw more than just exhaustion in them: they were red around the sides and surrounded by flecks of dirt on her skin, dirt that she hadn’t bothered to brush off. Diana looked defeated. “Amanda?” Akko whispered.

Diana’s head sank toward the floor. “I… screwed up.”

“What?” Hannah’s tone was just a tad incredulous. “You’re Diana Cavendish, you don’t just screw up —”

“I screwed up,” Diana said just a little louder. “I played into her grandmother’s plans, and now it’s worse than if I hadn’t gone. You were right,” she murmured, facing Akko for just a second.
Barbara placed a hand on her shoulder. “Diana,” she said, her voice firm and even, “how can we help?”

Diana let out a long sigh, almost a yawn, and let Barbara remove her traveling coat. “Thank you. Can one of you tell our professors I won’t be able to attend class today?”

“It’s as good as done.” Hannah nodded sharply.

“And….” Diana’s blinks were slow and long, and getting longer as she weaved her way toward the bed. “Can one of you… leave me a note for later? Investigate… fortune tellers.” She reached the bed and, without so much as a ‘good morning’, collapsed facefirst upon it. A second later, the sonorous sound of her deep breathing left no doubt: she was already asleep.

Akko eased her toward her pillow as gently as possible, then rolled her over to get her comfortable, as Barbara found a pen and paper to leave the note. “Thanks,” Akko said, giving her and Hannah a nod: they responded in kind. It was nice to know they all had at least one priority in common.

With a groan, Akko began getting ready for her day—a day she’d have to face half-asleep, apparently, and with a weight in her chest to boot. If Diana couldn’t convince Amanda to return to Luna Nova, then how in the hell was anyone else supposed to bring her back?

She was dressed and ready to walk down for breakfast when a tapping sound caught her attention. Hannah and Barbara had left already left the room, so it couldn’t be either of them: she glanced around the room for a few seconds, and then found the source of the sound. It was coming from the window. One of Croix’s drones was on the other side.

It kept tapping until Akko opened the window. Once she had, Croix’s hologram appeared atop the drone, like a trophy on a stand. A translucent, moving trophy. “Akko!” it said—she said. “Good morning. Hope you slept well.” Croix flashed a winning smile, with what looked like the same confidence she’d displayed in the previous year—but Akko spied an element of agitation. “Any luck catching up to Amanda?”

Akko stared at her and didn’t respond.

“Hm. Looks like no news is bad news, in this case.” Croix’s frown flashed across her face for only a second, and it seemed like a formality more than anything else. Then, the smile returned with twice as much nervous excitement behind it. “Well, I’ve developed something that might bring your search to an end. Come up to my office around lunchtime, and I’ll help you find Amanda faster than you can believe. See you there!”

Before Akko could respond—not that Akko was gonna respond—Croix’s hologram blipped out of existence, and the drone flew off and out of sight. Akko shut the windows, but that didn’t prevent her from feeling a chill. She grit her teeth and took a deep breath.

It was okay. Chariot trusted Croix now, and that meant Croix was okay, didn’t it?

Constanze returned from Modern Magic to her dorm, a sheaf of ungraded papers in one hand. As soon as she entered the room, the sheaf in question was tossed on the floor with the others: those
students could wait. She hopped on her bed and slammed the secret button. The bed opened up beneath her, and she fell.

So, another attempt at getting Amanda back had failed. Of course it had. Constanze had accepted the news from Hannah without comment—as usual—because of course any attempt spearheaded by Amanda’s hag of a grandmother would fail: bringing back Amanda safe and sound wasn’t her goal. It didn’t bother Constanze.

(That was a lie, and Constanze knew it—it did bother her. It bothered her immensely. But when she poured that portion of worry into the great black pit of numb terror that had been sitting in her stomach for all these days, it wasn’t more than a drop in the ocean.)

She landed in the minecart with a little grunt, and tapped impatiently at it until it started moving. When it did, it accelerated to an incredible speed within seconds. Amanda would usually whoop and holler with her arms in the air, whenever they came down together—Constanze gritted her teeth at the memory, and she definitely did not whoop or holler. She just leaned into the turns, and kept her eyes fixed forward, and waited to arrive at her lab—

\textit{Crash}.

One moment Constanze was hurtling forward, the next her face was slamming against something… surprisingly soft. When the stars left her eyes, she saw it was Jasminka. She stood unmoved on the tracks, with the minecart pressing futilely into her stomach, still trying to accelerate. “Constanze,” she said. “Take a rest.”

Constanze glared at her.

“When was the last time you got sleep?”

Constanze glared harder, and directed her gaze in particular to the bags that sagged under Jasminka’s eyes, matching Constanze’s pair.

“Just because I’m having trouble sleeping doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try.” Jasminka took a hold of the front of the cart, planted her feet, and started walking forward. Step by step, the cart was forced back despite its squealing wheels. “And you’re ignoring your homework, and your TA work for Professor Croix—”

Constanze growled: she was not going to be kept from her lab. She yanked a stun gun from her pocket, turned it up to full power, and jabbed it forward.

“Ow,” Jasminka said, shivering a little. Carefully, removing one hand from the front of the cart, she took the gun from Constanze’s hand and put it in her own pocket. “I know you’re upset, but you don’t have to lash out.”

Well, Constanze hadn’t expected it to work, but hopefully Jasminka would take her seriously now. She crossed her arms and gave Jasminka the most withering look she could muster.

“Of course I care what happens to Amanda. But I also care about what happens to you, and….”

Constanze rolled her eyes. As if losing a few nights of sleep and missing some homework was anything, compared to what Amanda was dealing with?

“Well, when you put it that way—”

Constanze stood and jabbed a finger into Jasminka’s front. There had to be some other reason for
this cowardice, and it wasn’t like Jasminka at all.

“That’s really mean….” Jasminka took a step back, letting the cart lurch forward. “I just… I don’t know if this is the right way to do it. That is, to help Amanda.”

Constanze threw her hands up, in as clear a gesture of bewilderment as she could manage.

“What I mean is, how do we know we’re not doing what her grandmother wants?”

Constanze was quiet. Not just her normal quiet: her arms were limply at her sides, and she wasn’t saying anything.

“It’s just… it feels like no matter what anyone does, it doesn’t help. Like they’re just playing into her grandmother’s hands, and I’m scared that whatever we do is going to do that too!” Jasminka heaved a breath. “I want to help her. I really do. But I don’t know how not to hurt her.”

Jasminka slumped over the cart. After a moment more of stillness, Constanze pulled the cart’s brake lever, then eased forward to get her arms around Jasminka. She couldn’t do much—it would take about three Constanzes to give Jasminka a proper hug—but Jasminka gave a thankful little murmur regardless. Then, after a few seconds, Constanze broke away and started signing again, as Jasminka looked on. Well, not looked on per se—her eyes remained closed—but she’d never had a problem understanding.

A finger pointed to either side, and a firm shake of the head. Then, her pinky pointed at Jasminka and her thumb pointed at herself, with a sharp nod. “So you think that we can succeed where they failed,” Jasminka began, and paused until Constanze tapped the side of her own head. “Because we know Amanda better?”

Enthusiastic nods from Constanze. She kept gesturing.

“And I guess us doing nothing could also be part of her grandmother’s plan….” Jasminka sighed. “You’re right. You’re right. I’m just scared.” She nodded, her expression serious. “But that’s no reason not to act.”

She walked to the side of the cart and jumped in, and Constanze nearly lost her footing as it rocked with her weight. Constanze smiled fiercely, and yanked the brake lever the other way. Once again, they were off.

“Just take care of yourself too, all right?” Jasminka murmured, pushing a bag full of apples in front of Constanze’s face. Constanze nodded in appreciation and took one, just as the cart dumped her into her ‘secret’ lab.

She bit off a chunk of the apple, stepping forward as she considered the structure she’d built so far. The problem, as she saw it, was that everyone else was being stupider than usual—not just because they were following Amanda’s grandmother’s directions, but because they were trying to force Amanda to come home. As if Amanda had ever let herself be forced by anyone.

“Wow,” said Jasminka, and Constanze knew without looking that she had to be gazing up at the towering pillar. “How can I help?”

Constanze turned around to face her, smiling fiercely. If they were going to help, they had to reach out.
Attention everyone! I am commenting on this chapter to say the following:

As of right now, this fanfiction has 123,456 words.

Hell yeah.
Where in the World is Amanda O'Neill? (4)

It was Akko's lunch break, and she was trying not to regret spending it flying up the New Moon Tower.

In one sense, coming up here was way easier than it had been the first time. She'd had to take the stairs back then, after all, and there were hundreds of those. But in every other way… Akko’s hands shook on her broom handle as she flew through the vast darkened space, feeling the eyes of every leering statue upon her. The Noir Rod had been constructed here, the emotional energy experiments had been managed from here… just about every horrible thing that Croix had done, it all came back to this place.

Well, except the one big horrible thing. Akko’s hands shuddered harder, and she whispered to herself as if calming a spooked horse: “Chariot trusts her. It’s all right, Chariot trusts her. It’s all right….”

When she reached the top, she took a breath before dismounting, then knocked on the heavy metal door. After a few seconds, Croix’s voice rang out. “Come in, Akko! Make yourself comfortable.” The door opened.

Lights came on in the room, and immediately it looked different from what Akko had known before. When she’d come up here to be examined by Croix, the room had been dim like some underground cavern, and the only light had been faint and green from computer monitors and behind windows. Now, though, everything was bright and shining, like a hospital without patients.

The slab where Akko had been examined—Akko shivered at the thought; what had Croix done to her back then? Chariot had never said—was still there, but covered in a heap of discarded and disassembled electronic equipment. In fact, almost everywhere Akko looked, she saw pieces of hardware strewn about haphazardly. A comfortable hum of electronics filled the air—almost as if the room were filled with life. There were even chairs scattered throughout, because Croix probably had to do office hours and this was technically her office: people besides Croix spent time here, and for entirely non-nefarious purposes at that.

It wasn’t quite enough for Akko to make herself comfortable, but it did a pretty okay job. She dropped her broom off at the door, then let out a nervous little laugh as she walked toward the middle of the lab, picking her way around the piles of circuit boards. “Hey, Professor Croix. I made it.”

“So you did!” Professor Croix was beaming, standing in hologram form on one of her drones with her arms outstretched in welcome. Beside her was some sort of large device: a chair was in front of a giant apparatus made of stacked servers and orderly collections of wires, and atop that apparatus was a smallish covered in blinking lights. Croix made a show of leaning on it, trying to rest her elbow on the chair’s back, except that her elbow went through it.

Akko looked at it. Croix looked at her. This continued for several seconds.

“So….” Akko let the word trail off, as if falling off a cliff. She imagined a splat in her head.

“That’s certainly a… thing.”

“Indeed!” Croix fake-tapped it, which mostly amounted to flapping her hand through space.

(This had to be a record for the most words used to say the least things.)
Croix sucked in a breath, shook her head a little, and seemed to find her center a little better. “So, yes! This ‘thing’ is what I brought you here to see.” She beamed again, in a way that was so chintzy and bright that it hurt to look at, like a harsh fluorescent. “This is valuable user feedback, after all. Any first impressions?”

Akko squinted at it. Lights blinked all over it, and little fan-whirs and electric-hums came from its guts, and none of this was helping her figure out what it was for—except for the big ugly chair part, which was pretty obvious. “It looks….” She tapped her chin, creeping forward. “Chunky.”

“Chunky, yes! I suppose you could say that!” Croix laughed. It sounded forced. “It’s absolutely a first draft, but I’m sure it can be refined. Try it on!”

“Try what…” Akko’s gaze went up to the dome on top: now that it was closer it seemed to be a helmet, connected to the apparatus with a cord as wide as a fire hose. “Oh, the helmet thing? You want me to put that on?”

“How wonderfully observant! Yes, that is exactly it. Try it on, please?”

“Okay but what does it—”

“It finds Amanda!” Croix spread her arms wide, then shook them in wild gesticulations as she kept talking. “Because that’s what anyone cares about, right? Find Amanda find Amanda find Amanda. Who cares about grading homework, or searching an ancient undiscovered library, or finding the cure to Wagandea's curse, we've gotta find Amanda! Find one dumb student, even if it means ignoring a school of hundreds, even if she doesn’t seem to want to come back, who cares, we’ve gotta find Amanda! So please—”

She sucked in a breath, then crossed her arms in that familiar confident posture. “Try it on, won't you?”

Akko took a breath too. It's okay. Chariot trusts her. Then she crossed to the chair, sat down, and held the helmet in her hands for a few seconds of examination before she put it on.

Things went dark and quiet. “Okay,” she said, her voice muffled. “Now what happens?”

There were several seconds of near-silence, with only the hum of machines providing white noise. Then, a burst of static smacked Akko in the ear, from which emerged Croix's voice. “—you hear me? I repeat, Akko, can you hear me?”

“Ow!” Akko winced with pain: it was way too loud.

“Audio hookup is go….” The next words were a little quieter. “Now what happens is, I need you to focus on your friend Amanda. You're going to help me find her, but you need to stay focused. Nod when you're ready.”

Akko closed her eyes, then thought better of it: it was just as dark either way. Eyes open, she put Amanda in her mind. Hair like fire, lazy and determined all at once, never backing down from a fight….

She nodded.

“All right. Try to stay focused. You might want to keep your eyes closed. What you see might be… distracting.”

The chunk of a switch being flipped echoed in her ears. And then her vision filled with light.
“What—” she yelled.

“Focus!”

It was like she was watching a million movies. No, that was too few: a billion movies, all at once, on a billion tiny screens. *Amanda. Think of Amanda.* “What's happening?” she said through gritted teeth. Her ears filled with murmurs, but billions of them, so that they were an unbearable cacophony.

“Filtering!” Croix's voice sounded excited. “We're narrowing in on her signature! Stay focused!”

It seemed that Akko was zooming in, and she felt vertigo from it: screens were falling off the edges of her vision and expanding. She focused on Amanda and on not puking her guts out.

“What are these videos?”

“Ignore them and focus! I said focus!”

Alarm bells. Not from the machine, but from the inside of Akko's head. What was she filtering out? What was she looking at? And, most important, why wasn't Croix telling her?

“We're getting closer. Think about Amanda!”

Akko squinted. She kept zooming in, and she was able to actually see one of the movies with some clarity now. It was... nothing in particular, as far as she could tell. A view of some book, whose text wasn't in English or Japanese or any other language she knew. But there was something else, something she couldn't quite make out....

“You're losing your clarity! Remember, this is about finding Amanda! Eyes on the prize!”

There was some sort of... blurry thing in the middle? And bits of orangish something-or-other drooping over the top.

“Back on track, Kagari!”

Nose. That's what the thing in the middle was, a nose. Because you could never really see your own nose clearly when you weren't focusing on it. And the thing at the top was hair.

“Am I looking through someone's eyes?” she yelled.

“Don't be ridiculous,” Croix said in a tone of clear exasperation. “You're looking through everyone's eyes. Every single witch on the planet is connected to the leylines at least in part, it's what lets them perform magic, and this device exploits that connection to allow me to pinpoint any witch I need to.”

Akko's head spun.

“Including Amanda O'Neill,” Croix continued, “so would you please focus again, Akko? Once this finds her, we won't—wait.”

Without any effort on Akko’s part, her view zoomed in again, and she fought the urge to vomit. The urge and what she saw were unrelated.

“Yes, I think I've got her!” Croix's voice was all at once triumphant, as one movie expanded until it filled Akko's field of vision: she saw what looked like a big drilling tower, construction equipment all around it. “We've got her! We'll have a location lock in under a minute and we won't lose her
again—"

Akko ripped the helmet from her head. The murmurs and the videos were gone, leaving only the harsh white light, and she backed away from the apparatus. She pulled out her wand.

“Akko, what are you—"

“Belga—” Akko started, aiming her wand at the apparatus, yelling at the top of her lungs.

Croix’s mouth opened in horror. Her hand reached out, she lunged at Akko. “Wait—stop!”

“—veeda!”

Magic fueled by rage. Croix would probably know all about that, but whenever Akko had tried to use the explosion spell, Belga Veeda, she’d never quite felt furious enough. Chariot and Diana had told her that it was high level magic, not something that she should be expected to get right away, but she’d still wanted to learn it despite never really being in the right mindset. Who knew, it might come in useful some day.

The jet of explosion magic flew from her wand and right through Croix. It smashed into the machine and blew it to shards.

Akko held her arm up to shield her face, from the dust and the smithereens. So did Croix in her peripheral vision, despite not being present. When the dust fell, and she lowered her arm, Croix’s eyes were wide and aghast. “That was my best lead. Why would you—"

The largest part left of the device was the helmet, and it looked scuffed and badly damaged, but a few lights still blinked feebly. Akko ran forward and stomped on it with her foot until it was flat, and then jumped on it with both feet until—

“Stop, Akko!” A bubble of light surrounded her, and she was lifted from the floor and forcibly turned around to face the horrified Croix. “What in the hell has gotten into—"

“What's wrong with you?” Akko yelled. Her voice was so loud it was rubbing against her throat like sandpaper, turning it hoarse. “What is broken in your head to make you think this is okay? I thought you had changed!”

The light surrounding her vanished, and she fell gracelessly, banging her knees against the floor. When she looked up, Croix had an expression like Akko had shoved a stake through her heart.

“You said you had changed,” Akko said.

“I—I did. I did! I'm trying to help now, I'm not hurting anyone, I'm not hijacking their emotions—"

“You made a machine that tracks every witch in the world, without asking their permission, and you think that’s not messing with people? That sees through their eyes, into their heads, and you think that's not hurting anyone?” Akko pushed herself to her feet. “You think that's somehow better than the riots you caused? Than when you stole my magic?”

Horrible silence filled the room like a stench. It didn't matter that there was still the hum of machines: it was silence nonetheless.

“That….” Croix’s voice was very small. “That wasn't me.”

“It was your idea! You're the one who decided that it was okay!” Akko stepped forward and
jabbed a finger at—through—Croix’s chest. “I don't care how much you wanted me to be angry at
Chariot about it—she didn't know, but you did! You're the one I blame, Croix!”

She turned around and aimed another vicious kick at the broken helmet, sending it skidding across
the room to smash into the corner. “I should've never come up here,” she muttered. “Only horrible
stuff happens here.”

She walked toward the door, but Croix’s disk was faster: it appeared in front of her. “Akko,” she
said. “I'm sorry.”

“I bet.”

“I'm just trying to help, I swear, I'm doing everything I can to help—what am I supposed to do?”
Croix’s knees buckled halfway, leaving her looking up at Akko as she shouted. “How am I
supposed to be better!? What can I do to make you not hate me!?”

Her knees buckled completely, leaving her kneeling. She looked helpless, and lost. She looked
confused. She looked…..

Like a child, Akko realized with a sudden start. Not because she was shorter than Akko when she
kneeled, although that didn't hurt. But… Chariot had told her some of the story. How Croix had
been sure she'd had a grand destiny, written in the stars, only to see it go to someone else. How
she'd spent her entire life trying to take that destiny back, trying to get her life back on track.

And it occurred to Akko that for all of her plans, all of her gadgets, all her suave charisma, there
was a part of Croix that had never, ever grown up.

She'd never thought she might think that of someone, and mean it in a negative way.

“Akko?” Croix said, her voice low and insistent and in pain. “What else do you want me to do? I'm
doing everything I can.”

Akko let out a pant of breath. “I know, Professor. And that's why I can't forgive you.”

Incomprehension filled up Croix's eyes like TV static. “Because,” Akko said, “that's what you’ve
always done, isn’t it? You wanted to help Chariot, so you did everything you could, even if it
meant hurting people. You wanted to bring back magic, and… even if what you wanted was good,
you did horrible things to get it! You can't do that, Professor, you just can't!”

She was breathing hard and fast now: the exertion of yelling at Croix felt like running a marathon,
or lifting a heavy weight… or maybe, getting a heavy weight off her at last. She’d never told this to
Croix before.

Akko tried to slow her breathing down. She grabbed her broom. “I just don't understand how you
can be the way you are. How you think you can do bad things and get good results. How you can
watch a riot, watch people hurting each other because you made them do it, and think everything is
going okay. I don't understand.” Akko walked past Croix, but kept her gazed fixed upon her. “I
hope I never understand that.”

“Akko,” Croix whispered. She didn't turn around to face Akko: she was just kneeling, facing the
fragments of her machine. It was like her head was through a guillotine's slot. “I thought… I hoped
you had forgiven me.”

“I hoped you had earned it.”
Akko jumped off the stairs and flew, down and out of Croix's tower.

“Find me… find rest… me….”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You're a bit of a broken record, Scarlette, did you know that?”

Tiff flew up the New Moon tower at an easy pace. Hopefully Professor Croix would be inside, or at least projected inside: Tiff had been pinging her via her drones for something like ten minutes, to no avail. It was right about time for another dose of *Metamorphie Vestesse*, and Tiff whistled a little ditty to herself as she flew. *When you wish upon a—*

“Please… Tiffany….”

Correction: Tiffany *tried* to whistle a little ditty. She frowned. “Can you stop for, I don’t know, five minutes?”

Before long she’d reached the top, but she didn’t like what she saw. She’d been to this room before for office hours, when she’d had questions about circuitry or amperage, and there had always been some mess as Professor Croix tinkered away at some side project, but… this was a shambles. Through the open door, Tiff saw that bits of debris littered the floor and there was a faint burning smell. In the center was the hologram of Professor Croix, kneeling, staring at the opposite wall.

“Professor?” Tiff said. Then, because she didn't reply, Tiff tried out a probing, “Croix?”

Professor Croix looked around. Her eyes looked red: maybe there was a glitch in the hologram. “Yes?”

“What happened to your eyes? Did an experiment go wrong?”

She slowly stood. “Yes. That's… exactly correct. What did you want?”

Tiff put on her winningest smile. She even tried to use the voice Mother used sometimes, the one with all the warmth. “Could you please give me the protective clothes again? I'd like to go searching for Amanda O'Neill again.”

Croix didn’t exactly respond. To put it another way, Tiff was waiting for exactly one response, the kind that would see her outfitted in shiny white clothes, so Croix’s eye-rubbing silence counted as no response at all by her standards. “Excuse me? Is there some kind of audio glitch on your end? Some kind of communication problem?”

“You keep nailing the… nail.” Croix sighed, then forced herself to straighten up. “Communication problem, precisely. Repeat what you just said to me.”

“I want you to give me the special outfit,” Tiff said with utmost care, enunciating every syllable, “so I can go help Amanda O'Neill.”

“Ah, so I did hear you correctly the first time. And yet there’s still this….” Croix raised her index finger, tapped her temple. “This communication problem.” She spoke in a sudden tone of command: “Pull up attendance records, Tiffany Vandergard, last seven days.”

A spreadsheet appeared before her. It had a lot of red blocks in it. “Current trends indicate that
you’ll soon be spending more time out of class than in it. Too busy being altruistic in the field, eh? I’m glad you care so much about your senior.” Croix’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

“I, um… it’s not just Amanda, I’m also recovering an ancient—”

“I know what you’re doing, Miss Vandergard.” Croix leaned forward, her eyes narrow. “Even if—pardon me, especially if you don’t.”

Tiff flinched a little. She hadn’t told Croix about Scarlette, so how could she—

“Joyriding.”

Tiff blinked.

Professor Croix flew closer, and Tiff stepped back. “You don’t know where Amanda O’Neill is, because I don’t know where she is, and I would have found out before you. And no matter how fast your broom is, you can’t actually search the whole world by yourself, which makes this pointless. You’re out joyriding instead of meeting your actual responsibilities.”

“No, I’m—I swear I’m trying to help! Why don’t you believe me?”

“If it’s any consolation, I believe that you believe you’re out looking for Amanda.” Croix’s smile was, and Tiff hadn’t expected this, strangely sad. Not at all the self-satisfied smirk she so often wore. “I know you think you’re doing it for a good reason, even if you’re not. Even if all you’re doing is being… selfish and self-destructive.” She sighed. “Your request for protective garb is hereby denied.”

“You can’t….” A bit of Tiff, the angriest bit, flared up and took over her head. “Do you know what this is?” She jabbed a finger at the broom. “This broom chose me! This broom beyond brooms! It’s the broom that breaks the rating scale, the one and only S-rank broom—the Shooting Star! It’s above and beyond any rules!”

She jabbed her finger at Professor Croix. “And it chose me! We’re S-ranked! You can’t give me the power to use this broom to its fullest and—and take it away! You can’t do this to me! Not to me!”

“So.” Croix took a breath. For a moment it seemed she would laugh, but she didn’t—in fact, in the next moment she looked as humorless as a war memorial. “This is sort of what it looks like from the other side.” She sighed. “Tiffany Vandergard, you are hereby grounded. I will not give you the gear you need, and if I find you’ve gone on any more joy rides without my explicit permission, you’ll be in detention for a week. Now don’t you have some homework to catch up on?”

“You—” Tiffany’s teeth bared. “I thought you said you were a cool teacher!”

The disk swiveled around, but Croix looked over her shoulder at Tiff one last time, her eye just visible over the collar of her cape. Her expression was unreadable, and her words were utterly flat. “Times change.”

Her hologram switched off, and the drone flew away. Nothing was left in the empty room except Tiff, and the noises of computers—

“Find… me… Tiffany….”

And one quiet voice, crying out for help.
There’d been this girl, once. Probably a girl. Amanda was, like, seventy percent sure it had been a girl.

They’d been friends, almost certainly. Amanda screwed up her face, tried to yank back the memories, and came up with a blank silhouette with some sort of something, some decoration, in her hair. They’d had fun together, that feeling was still strong enough to sit in Amanda’s mind, but any details were lost: it was like any memories she had were hidden behind frosted glass, and all she could see were the outlines—just feelings, not specifics. Even trying to see that, just squinting through the fuzz of time, strained her mind’s eye. Maybe they’d known each other in person, maybe they’d sent letters, who knew?

And then a memory that was crystal clear: Amanda had been summoned before Amalthea, and dear old Granny had said she wouldn’t be playing with the girl anymore, and that had been it. She’d tried, God knew, but she’d never managed to find that girl again. What had happened was that her parents—Granny’s minions—had brought over some other girl with—yeah, that was right, with brown hair and a ribbon in it, to replace the first one. And apparently it had worked, because Amanda remembered the second girl a hell of a lot better than she had the first one.

Had the first girl even had anything in her hair?

Amanda’s fists shook, but she kept walking down the hall.

It happened every time. When she’d been ten, and first gotten into broom riding, Amanda’s parents had enrolled her in some shitty summer camp until she’d pretended to hate flying so they would leave her alone. When they’d learned about the sword fighting thing at Appleton, they’d thrown her at some world class fencing instructor to ruin it for her over the summer. Obviously they hadn’t done anything that would require, just for instance, effort—they were too cheap to spend anything except money. But when you were O’Neill rich, you didn’t need more than money to make every single interest of hers crash and burn. Why try at all?

And they’d apparently learned about her friends too. They’d pretty much ruined Diana somehow, and—and, God, if they’d learned about Akko—about Jaz and Cons—

Amanda’s jaw clenched, and she planted a hand on the blank white wall—sterile and lifeless like a hospital’s wall. She felt like at any moment, she’d be painting it with vomit. Focus. She wasn’t back here to let a bunch of old shitty memories knock her off her feet. She was here to make a goddamn statement, and like hell was she chickening out now.

She sucked in a breath, and she stared forward at the double doors—the good ol’ boss doors. Well, now she was ready for the fight. “Never,” she whispered to herself: then she walked forward three steps, raised her leg, and—

The door opened before she could kick it in. How predictable.

“Welcome back, Amanda. Aren’t you excited to see me again.”

With a little groan of frustration, Amanda turned on her heel, clicked her boots, and walked three steps—and appeared right at Amalthea’s bedside. Absolutely worth the effort of not walking through the offered door. “How simply immature,” said Amalthea’s voice, as Amanda took a look around.
The bedroom had changed every time she’d visited it as a child: year after year, more pieces of medical equipment were added, respirators and dialysis machines and others whose names escaped Amanda. This time, things had proceeded basically as she’d expected: the equipment surrounding Amalthea’s bed was so densely packed that there was hardly room to stand. Amanda snorted, and raised her voice a little to be heard over the steady whirrs and hums and heartbeat-beeps. “Wow, Granny. You get any more of these things, you’ll need a whole new mansion just for them. Christ, you look frail.”

No, she didn’t. Anyone else would have looked fragile, even helpless, but to Amanda’s eyes Amalthea only looked stronger for the array around her. Like a spider, poised and waiting at the center of a vast web. Not moving, not because she couldn’t, but because—why would she need to?

It was difficult to stand near Amalthea and not feel like a fly.

Amanda clenched her fist. “Is this the part where you say you know why I’m here?”

She stared at Amalthea. The medical devices had taken away the old hag’s ability to speak years ago, but the wonders of technology allowed a solution: Amanda saw a little motion beneath the sheet over her grandmother, and knew it was the twitching of her finger. The finger was connected to an electronic device, which interpreted the movements and translated them into—

“Since you want to know, you’ll find the answer in the letter on my nightstand.”

A voice. All-encompassing, filling the room from hidden speakers. It was smooth, and secure, and stronger than any Amanda had ever heard from Amalthea’s lips.

Amanda glanced down and saw, resting atop (what else) a collection of antique music boxes, a wax-sealed envelope. She managed not to gulp. “Oh yeah, let me guess. This is one of those things where I open it up and ooh, scary, it’s got all the stuff I’ve just said written down on it. Because god freaking forbid you should ever miss a chance to be the absolute actual worst.” Forcing a laugh, she tore it open. “All right then… sasquatch, Beelzebub, queef, sixty nine four twenty, hello, I’m the O’Neill servant who had to write all this down, and I’m a little bitch.”

She turned the note over, looked it over, and cackled. “And I thought I was supposed to be the predictable one.”

“Masking your fear with humor and bravado is a beginner’s trick. You’ll soon learn better ways to cope.”

It really was all boiling inside her. Not just the fear, but the hatred—it was like she wanted to vomit but would never get out all the bile. And there was good ol’ Granny, still as ever, the ghost of a smile on her face.

Amanda glanced down at all the medical equipment. All those wires, all those plugs and sockets. “You know, I could think of one way,” she murmured. “Just off the bat.” How many redundancies, she mused. If she went at it, just at random, how many plugs would she need to pull before the only thing lying in that bed was a withered old corpse?

“You’re thinking it would be easy to kill me.”

“Duh.” Amanda swallowed some spit. “Not like you can lift a finger to stop me. You can barely lift a finger at all.” The vision was frozen in her head, and it didn’t even look all that different from the reality she was seeing: Amalthea, motionless at last.

“All you’re proving is that you still haven’t learned what power is, little doll.”
“Yeah, that totally means something more than meaningless abstract bullshit.”

“Then I’ll be more concrete. You’ll turn round and see that one of the plugs is bright red. The largest one, behind you.”

Carefully, Amanda turned halfway around so that she still had eyes on Amalthea. It was impossible to miss, once it was in her view, and it was plugged into a wall socket.

“This plug has no redundancies. When it is removed from the wall, I will die.”

Amanda stared at it.

“You’ll pull it out now. If you wish.”

Amanda blinked. “What—what the shit?”

“I can’t stop you. You want it.”

“You don’t—I don’t—” Amanda’s jaw worked feebly for a few seconds. The premonition flashed in her head: yanking the plug out, watching Amalthea tremble, hearing the silence as all the medical devices shut down—

The bile rose in her throat.

“A—are you, do you think I’m stupid? I lay a finger on that plug, a SWAT team sprints through the door and takes me out, right? I’m not gonna pull that!” She laughed, and didn’t say, I don’t want to kill you.

Why the hell not? Why didn’t she want that?

The corners of Amalthea’s mouth twitched. “If only you had been paying attention, little doll, you’d have learned the greatest lesson I have ever tried to teach you. What you won’t do is the same as—”

Amanda whirled around, shouting and cutting off Amalthea’s words. “Okay, shut the hell up, all right? For once in your life this meeting isn’t about you, Granny. This is about me, telling you, that it’s over!” She advanced on Amalthea, shoving a piece of equipment to the floor on her way, and leaned over her face, getting in real close. “I’m telling you that I don’t care if you can predict me, because I am Hurricane freaking Amanda and I am gonna tear down everything this shitpile of a family has ever built.”

Her voice dropped to a hiss. “And I am never gonna be afraid of you again.” Saying it helped.

There was a pause.

“What you can’t do,” Amalthea finished, in a measured tone. Her eyes didn’t even open.

Amanda groaned and looked away. “Jeez, Granny. Anyone ever told you that you’re an absolutely awful listener?”

“How nice to know I’ve passed at least one trait onto you. Even if it’s not the most important —”

“I don’t wanna hear another word out of your… speakers,” Amanda said, her hands curling into fists, turning away, “about what we have in common. We have nothing in common, you get that? I have spent the last decade of my life making sure we have nothing in common! So don’t give me that canned villainous, ‘you and I are the same’, bullshit! I’m sick of it!”
“Yet you will continue to listen,” Amalthea said, and Amanda turned around to see her face. “This, despite how I’ve already explained how you can make me stop. It’s almost enough to make one think that your return to my side, to the place you profess to hate more than any other, is…. The corners of her mouth twitched up. “Destiny.”

It was as if a wire in Amanda had snipped. She jerked forward, her hands slamming into the mattress at Amalthea’s side. “What is wrong with you!?” she yelled, her voice a little hoarse. “What happened to make you so awful? Why are you… why do you hate me so much!?”

It was the strangest thing. She stood there, leaning over her grandmother as if grieving a loved one, and then Amalthea’s whole body changed position. Just a bit, no part moving further than a millimeter, but now she looked more… relaxed. Somehow less immediately threatening. “I’ve never hated you, Amanda. I’ve always loved you, far more than your mother. If you’d used your head, you would have realized why I devote such personal attention to you.”

“What the fuck,” Amanda breathed. “What do you think love is? ”

“Turning a girl with the capacity for greatness into the best version of herself. And you will be, but right now… you are not. You won’t be, until you finally understand my lesson. Until you understand how to become my true heir.”

Amanda didn’t even have it in her to respond to that. All she could do was seethe, quietly, as Amalthea continued. “You’ll find it a comfort to know that you and I are not the same. Not yet. We are both pawns of fate, like every other human on the planet. What differentiates us is that you’re not willing to do what fate demands. What survival demands.”

Amanda’s head jerked up. “You’re talking like I have a choice. How’s that supposed to work, if everything’s predetermined?”

“Hm. How to explain the multidimensional flow of time to a powerless neophyte…. ” The speakers let out what could only be an aggrieved sigh, and Amalthea’s head tilted microscopically upward, as if she were rolling her eyes. “Suffice to say that fighting the direction of destiny is as futile as swimming against a fast-flowing current. If there is any choice at all, it is to embrace destiny and let it guide you. I did. And as a result… you have known nothing but comfort.”

That was enough to force a laugh from Amanda. A disbelieving, horrified laugh disconnected from humor, but a laugh nevertheless. “What, you expect me to thank you for being a heartless bitch for a hundred years running? For ruining my life every way you can think of? For being—for being cruel?”

“Cruelty survives. Kindness dies.”

Amanda gritted her teeth.

“Your mother could never learn this. All she does, she does in fear of me. But you will be my true successor, and keep our family alive, once you understand this greatest lesson.”

“We are rich!” Amanda pounded a hand against the bedframe, producing a satisfying thunk. “I literally can’t get rid of our money fast enough and you’re telling me I’ve got to keep our family alive —what, do you think it’s on life support just because you are?”

“It would vanish in an instant! ”

Amanda jerked back, because Amalthea’s free hand had just closed into a fist beneath her sheets, and her voice had come out as a harsh shout. “You never saw what the O’Neills were before I
acquired the sight. What squalor we lived in. Nor did you see the squalor this country was reduced to, even as we escaped to comfort. All that we have, a moment of weakness could be enough for it to vanish. A single mistake! You will not be weak. You must not....”

Her trembling fist stilled, and relaxed. “Ah, but it doesn't matter. I see now.”

Amanda’s breath caught. “What do you—you don’t see anything.”

“Yes. A vision. I... see....”

To Amalthea’s side, one of the music boxes made a noise, and Amanda stared as it creaked open—the music started, and the doll danced. Slowly, irregularly, the other boxes opened beside it, until the same clinking tune had been layered atop itself half a dozen times. There was no music there, only cacophony.

And Amalthea’s eyes shot open. Milky white, almost entirely blind, and staring upward with horrifying focus. “I see,” hissed the voice from the speakers. “Your final escapade will run its course, and then, Amanda, little doll... at last, you’ll return home. Head hung low.”

“No,” Amanda growled.

“You’ll apologize for your thoughtless behavior.”

“Shut up.” She shoved herself upright.

“And you’ll finally make the only real choice. The choice to stop wasting your life.”

“No!”

Amanda grabbed for one of the music boxes, forcing its lid shut with the palm of her hand. “Like hell it’s gonna go the way you say,” she muttered.

But Amalthea just smiled, and what coursed through Amanda wasn’t rage—it was the cold thrill of fear.

Her hand moved without conscious thought. The music box flew across the room and shattered against the wall. “Like hell!” Amanda yelled, already kicking her heel and taking her three steps.

But Amalthea was too quick. “I’ll see you soon,” said the speakers, as Amanda walked out—teleported out.

She was back at her hideout, under an outcropping of rock that shielded her from the harsh sun but not from the caloric heat. She kicked viciously at a length of blasting cord, sending it skittering along the ground, and when that wasn’t enough, she curled her hand into a fist and punched the rock. “I’ll never be you!”

Punch.

“You hear me, old hag? Never!”

Punch, and her knuckles were raw and red.

“Never!”

Punch. She sank to the ground, clutching at her bruised, bleeding fingers. “Never,” she whimpered.
The pain stayed with her for several seconds more. Then she hissed and drew herself upright, still holding her own bloody hand. “I’m going to tear you down,” she whispered, through a throat that felt as raw as the skin on her hand. It was the only thing left to do.

It was late enough at Luna Nova that no one was allowed in the library. Any student who might dare to sneak in for a late night study session, or something less seemly, would certainly be stopped by either a teacher or the esteemed—if unofficial—hall monitor.

There was one flaw in this security system, of course: what if the hall monitor was the one sneaking in?

The heavy silence of night lay thick throughout the library, broken only by Diana’s quiet movements as she sorted through the card catalog with one hand. The other hand was clenched around her wand, which was enchanting books from all over the library to float, dancing through moonbeams, to her table. Every book the library had about fortune telling, and about the supposed greatest fortune teller of all time: Amalthea O’Neill.

There weren’t many. Why weren’t there many, in a library like this?

Once they had all been gathered, and neatly piled in alphabetical order, Diana stared at the stack and sighed—she’d found no more than a half dozen. She only hoped it would be enough.

She hadn’t known enough, the last time she’d met Amanda. She hadn’t known well enough to avoid hurting her friend, to avoid being manipulated. She’d been made a fool of. Never again.

Teeth clenched, Diana took the top book from the pile, and set to work.

Something was poking her in the side of the head.

All right, not something. Tiff knew exactly what it was. But she didn’t want to acknowledge it, not even in the relative safety of her own brain. Maybe it would go away if she ignored it, and focused on chugging through her massive pile of homework in Magical Astronomy. And Runes. And Potions. And—

A small object struck her on the side of the head, then fell to the desk. She looked down to see that it was a piece of popcorn, and then looked to her right to stare at the miscreant who’d thrown it. “You seem stressed, mate,” Char said, popping a handful into her mouth and chewing noisily. “Any reason?”

Now, the thing that had been poking her in the side of the head was poking her in the forehead. Tiff’s eyes narrowed. “Imagine a mosquito.”

“You seem stressed, mate,” Char said, popping a handful into her mouth and chewing noisily. “Any reason?”

“Kay.” The monosyllable was muffled by popcorn, and barely coherent.

“A mosquito buzzing around your head, making those little, those little whining noises. And you
can’t swat it.”

“Sure.”

“Now imagine the mosquito is six feet long and fifteen hundred years old and can talk!” Tiff threw up her hands and tried to shove the Shooting Star away from her head, which it had been poking for the last five minutes. “But never in complete sentences! Go away!”

“Find… rest… me….”

“I can’t! Croix—Professor Meridies—won’t let me leave the school, remember? It’s not my fault we can’t go anywhere!” Tiff stood, her face as red as the Shooting Star itself, and planted her feet to shove it harder.

“Please… Tiff….”

“Would you please shut up—” Tiff grabbed the broom by the shaft, and wrenched it vertical “—and let me finish my homework—” she stumbled to the corner of the room “—in peace!?!” With a grunt of effort, she shoved the Star into the corner. “Ugh, why did I let it get this bad,” she groaned, tramping back to the desk with the pile of homework on it that was as big as her head. She jabbed a finger behind herself at the corner. “Oh, right—because I was busy trying to help you!”

The Shooting Star, for once, was silent despite. Blessedly it stayed in the corner where she’d laid it, leaning against the wall like any other broom.

“Y’know, you could always sneak out.” Char made a little hm noise. “Just a thought.”

“I’ve been directly ordered by a teacher.” Tiff spat out the last word, then sat and hunched down over her Potions notes. Somewhere her math was wrong, because the two sides of this alchemical reaction weren’t lining up at all.

“Sure, sure. But what if you just, like, went out the window? How would she know?”

Before Tiff could answer, a beeping noise sounded through the room. Char pulled out her phone and frowned. “Aw, crap, is it four already? Duck.” Tiff dutifully ducked down. Char picked up her wand, mumbled, “Laxo,” and pointed it at the window in front of Tiff.

The window opened just in time for Mani to zoom through and come to a halt. “And no crash!” she exclaimed, dismounting and then jumping in place. “I think I am really getting the hang of—” the broom, which was held upright in Mani’s hand, jolted upward by about four feet and sent her crashing into the ceiling. “I, I think I am nearly getting the hang of it,” she amended, a bit cross-eyed. “Hello, Chiff and Tar.”

“Put that thing down before you hurt yourself,” Tiff said with a voice as strained as rigor mortis. “And also hello.”

Mani laid it next to the Star. “This may be a strange question,” she asked, shaking her head to get her bearings back, “but do either of you know why one of Professor Croix’s droids is hovering right outside this window?”

Tiff sighed, then laid eyes on Char. “What was that about just sneaking out, Char?”

Char rolled her eyes and returned to her popcorn. Mani looked first to her, then to Tiff. “I feel as though I have missed something. Have I missed something?”
“Just Tiff yelling at her broom like a crazy person,” Char said, holding out a hand as Mani passed. Mani high-fived it on the way up to her bunk. “And also she has the most homework backlog of all of us. I’m not the worst anymore. Woo!” Her arms raised nearly to vertical before flumping back onto her bed.

Tiff was clutching her pen so hard it felt about to shatter at any moment. “I’m working on it.”

“Welp, fair enough. I can’t compete with that.” Char snorted. “How’s flying practice goin’, Mani?”

“Akko is really good at helping teach!” Mani leaned down off her bunk bed to look at Char, and her voice had a glow about it. “It’s like she… she really gets what it’s like not to know how to fly right! Not that you aren’t also a helpful teacher,” she added, glancing at Tiff, “but it really helps to have someone who’s been there. Do you know what I mean?”

Tiff grunted in response.

Mani’s voice went a little quieter, a little less bright. “Are you angry because Professor Meridies won’t let you go flying like you want to? Was it insensitive to bring up enjoying flying? Sorry,” she mumbled under her breath.

“I’m not angry. Why would I be angry? Who said I’m angry.” Char stabbed the pen into the paper. “It’s not as if it’s the one thing I love more than anything in the world. Oh wait!”

“Wow, this is bad.” Tiff heard a ruffling of sheets and saw that Char had pushed herself upright, and was now sitting instead of lying down. “You’re never sarcastic, mate.”

“Gosh, aren’t I?”

“Mate.” Now Char was standing and putting a hand on her shoulder. “As your friend, who cares about you… I think you’re taking this way too hard and you need to stop being a wanker about it.”

Tiff jolted back in her seat, as if physically experiencing the whiplash that Char’s comment had put her through. “Wait, what?”

“That was very rude of Char to say. And also, she’s right.” Mani sighed, leaning down further toward Tiff. “The teacher made it so you had to do school things. That’s the teacher’s job.”

“But—but she was the one that—how is it my fault that—” The air escaping from Tiff’s lips made a noise like an angry elephant.

And, of course, the Star chose that exact moment to pipe in: “Tiff… please….”

“I’m leaving!” Tiff jolted to her feet and gathered up her homework in her arms, holding it like a bowling ball. “I can’t focus in here with all of you people… talking! Goodbye!” She marched to the other side of the room, kicked the door open, and walked out.

Tahiti.

*God damned* Tahiti.

Andrew could still see that vast, monotone blue sky when he closed his eyes. He never thought he
could hate a color, but there it was. He hated the color blue. He hated it so *goddamned much.*

“What are you doing?” said Louis from behind him, as Andrew lay in the hotel lobby, eyes covered with his arms. The darkness helped, but only a little.

Andrew suppressed a groan and made to lift his arms, but Frank answered first: apparently the question had been addressed to him. “Looking up alternate flights on my phone—what does it look like? I’m a little vacationed out, in case you haven’t noticed.” The words were uncharacteristically testy. “I already missed my date.”

“What? No!” There were sounds of a struggle behind Andrew’s head. “My father will have my head if we return without his plane!”

“We can get the stupid broken plane later, Louis, now get off my phone or else—”

“We most certainly cannot get the plane later!”

Well, now Andrew understood why Ms. O’Neill might set up a fight club. He sucked in a breath, and tried not to think about how appealing of an idea that might be.

And then his reverie, brief as it was, was interrupted by a clamoring ringtone—the sounds of the scuffle ceased. “Turn that off,” Andrew muttered, making himself heard under the shrill noise.

“Andrew, it’s your phone,” Frank said. There were footsteps, and the ringing grew closer.

Andrew tuck his arms over his ears. “I do not care, Frank.”

“And it’s from your ex.”

*That* got Andrew to sit up, and look at Frank in astonishment. Frank smiled and handed over Andrew’s cellphone. According to the screen, the call was from—

“Diana Cavendish is *not* my ex,” Andrew muttered, snatching the phone away as Frank snorted. God, he hoped his face wasn’t red. He pressed the green button on the screen, then held it to his ear. “Andrew Hanbridge speaking.”

“Andrew.” Diana’s voice was terse. “I need your help.”

“An unusual circumstance.” Andrew’s eyes widened a little: this was *interesting.* This was something to *do.*

“Unusual times.”

Andrew stood up and walked casually across the floor, leaning against a glass window. “Is this about Ms. O’Neill?”

“It’s about her grandmother. I think she’s been lying to all of us.”

Andrew’s frown deepened. “How so.”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out. I need you to tell me everything about what happened to your plane.”

Andrew’s voice caught. “You’re not suggesting—”

“Oh, *yoohoo!*”
Andrew looked around at the voice. It was faintly familiar, but as he scanned the lobby, no one seemed to be around other than him, Louis, and Frank. And come to that, wasn’t that a bit odd? Where was the concierge at the front desk? Where were any of the other guests?

“Over here,” said the voice, and the body attached to it walked into the lobby around a corner, accompanied by a soft jingling from her earrings. It was Mrs. O’Neill—Amanda’s mother, not her grandmother. “Andrew Hanbridge!” she said, and flashed him a gilded grin. “So nice to see you again.”

“Mrs. O’Neill,” Andrew said, nodding politely and lowering his phone from his ear. “What a wonderful coincidence to have you here with us.”

She laughed at that. “Oh, please! It was fated that we should meet here!” She walked toward him. “I just wanted to thank you for helping to find my daughter, and, regrettably enough, to ask you for just a little more help, thank you.”

“I think you should turn off your phone, Mr. Hanbridge,” Mrs. O’Neill said. She raised a wand, and a bolt of electricity jumped from it to Andrew’s phone, and Diana’s voice vanished as the screen went black. “Now, as I was saying, and thank you for accepting, I need a ride.”

There was a feeling in Andrew’s gut. It was an unsettling, hard feeling, and it told him that Mrs. O’Neill wasn’t actually asking for a ride at all. “I regret to tell you,” he said evenly, “that we have no transportation at this moment.”

“Oh, pfft!” Mrs. O’Neill flapped the hand that was holding her wand. “I think you’ll find that your plane is really quite easy to fix, if someone who knows what’s wrong with it takes a look.”

Over to the side, Louis started forward. “Someone who knows what’s wrong with it… you?”

“We O’Neills know everything, didn’t you know?” She smiled sweetly at him, or at least she seemed to think it was sweetly.

Louis scowled. “I’m not letting you use my father’s plane.”

“Oh, that’s a real pity, Mr. Blackwell, it truly is. But, ah, just one more question.” Mrs. O’Neill raised her hands theatrically and clapped them together, two times and quickly. Three more people entered the lobby: three men, wearing suits that did nothing to disguise the bulk of their bodies. Each suit had an orange A upon its breast.

The three men stood around Mrs. O’Neill, ready to do whatever she said next— to whoever she said next. “And the question is,” she said, “what if I brought these good friends along with you?”

The transmitter.

If Constanze were stupid enough to bring it outside, it would tower above the school. She wasn’t, so it didn’t, but it did dominate her entire workspace: she’d had to dig the secret lab even lower to accommodate it. Fitting, to be honest. It was occupying all of her mind, too.
“Constanze?” Jasminka said. Constanze turned off her welding torch, flipped up her mask, and looked down from her broom. Two stories below, Jasminka had one hand on the transmitter to keep it stable, and the other was bending some girders into shape. She always liked being helpful.

“Your computer program finished,” she said. “It says there’s an error.”

Constanze flipped down her mask again and screamed as loudly as she could, which wasn’t very loud even when she wasn’t muffling it with a welding mask. It didn’t help much, was the point.

Whatever. They’d find Amanda somehow, and—this was the crucial point—they would do it without any help from anyone who had had any contact with the other O’Neills. Or with anyone who worked for them. They’d do it and get it right, and save her, and—

“So this is where you’ve been instead of helping me grade homework.”

For the second time in a row, Constanze paused mid-weld and looked up. There was Professor Croix, floating to meet Constanze at eye level, arms crossed and translucent as ever. “Hello, Constanze,” she said. “I couldn’t help but notice you were building a—”

Constanze flipped down her mask and blasted the welding torch right through Croix’s holographic face, making the projection fizzle. Then she turned away and got back to work on that weld, again, with a little groan. What was the point of having a secret lab if everyone knew about it?

“That was just a little bit rude.”

Constanze’s hand jerked up, again pointing the torch at Croix’s face. Croix continued, apparently unfazed. “Have you been building this all this time, instead of your actual duties as a student?” Constanze could hear the smirk in Croix’s voice as she continued: “This is probably the point where a less hypocritical teacher would chastise you for getting tunnel vision and losing sight of what matters, etcetera etcetera. But I need your help.”

“Excuse me, Professor?”

That was Jasminka’s voice. Croix and Constanze both looked down to see her staring up, girder still in hand. “Please leave.”

Croix snorted. “Miss Antonenko. What, do you plan on forcing me out? How?”

Jasminka, still looking Croix in the eyes, took the girder in both hands and bent it into a pretzel. “I’ll probably think of something.” Her voice was as innocent as ever.

“Oh.” Croix’s face was mostly a set of outlines, but Constanze could still tell that the color had gone out of it.

“Sorry,” Jasminka said. She dropped the girder-pretzel with a resounding clang, denting the floor, and pointed toward an exit. “We really can’t talk to any of the O’Neills, or anyone they’ve talked to. It’s not safe.”

Croix had looked in the direction Jasminka pointed, but now she stopped. “Wait. Is that all you’re worried about?”

Jasminka’s eyebrows raised.

“I haven’t spoken to any of Amanda’s family. They haven’t tried to get in touch with me. I’m not trying to find her for them, I’m trying to find her because Headmistress Holbrooke....” Croix looked down for a moment, then raised her head. “I’m doing this because I am a teacher and she is
my student, and I am responsible for her. And I need your help.” A shade of her usual smirk
returned to her face. “And judging by the errors on that computer screen down there, you could use
mine as well. You care about her too—a lot more than I do, clearly.”

She stuck out her hand, even though Constanze couldn’t shake it. “So, and I mean this in a purely
colloquial sense, what do you say?”

Constanze stared for a few seconds, with a set of scales in her head. The one side was pretty heavy:
the world nearly ending was a bit of a sore point, not to mention the other crimes and the times
she’d nearly gotten Constanze killed. Which was more than once. And she hadn’t even been in the
thick of it like Akko. And she usually preferred to work alone—not counting Jasminka. All told, a
lot of weight on the one side.

But finding Amanda was on the other side of the scale, and that meant there was no contest.
Constanze stuck her hand out as well, and put it through Croix’s: the two shook, their hands
remaining roughly in sync.

“Perfect. Then we don’t have time to waste.” Croix clapped her hands twice, and loudly, and then
Constanze heard a host of mechanical whirrs. From every entrance to the room came a swarm of
Croix’s droids, which fanned out to fill the lab. “Show me exactly what you’re trying to do here.
And tell me exactly what is up with Amanda.”
Where in the World is Amanda O'Neill? (5)

“*My brain is fried,*” Akko groaned, her head resting on one of the desks in Diana’s room.

That was an understatement. Her brain was way past fried: it was blackened, burned, turned completely to charcoal. If she tried to use it for *any* more studying, she was pretty sure all she’d get out of it would be the smell of something on fire. “Diana,” she whined, “tell me the answers.”

Diana, who was sitting across the room, didn’t respond. Akko dragged her head off the desk and managed to get a look at her. “Diana? Whazzat?”

Diana wasn’t occupied with homework or *MOP* stuff like Akko had expected. Instead she had a giant orb on her desk, and a bunch of jars of what looked like spices. “What’s that?” Akko asked, some of her brain-burn forgotten as she stood up, wandered over to Diana’s side, and leaned on her chair. “Diana…” she said. When Diana didn’t respond, Akko tried again, stretching out the vowel at the end like a mosquito’s whine: “Dianaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa —”

Diana’s finger slapped against her lips and shut her up. “Akko, please,” she whispered. “This is delicate magic and I’ve never tried it before. I need to focus so that I don’t get it wrong.” She returned her attention to the orb.

It took Akko’s study-addled brain a few seconds to realize that it was, in fact—“Is that a crystal ball? Are you trying to see the future?”

Diana looked up again, her eyes narrowed. “Don’t you have studying to do?”

“My brain is dry.” Akko slumped against Diana’s shoulder. “Between *MOP* stuff and studying I’m kinda out of thinking juice.”

Diana snorted, but didn’t otherwise react to Akko’s face being right against hers. “That’s rather unfortunate, considering your Advanced Runes test tomorrow.”

“There’s too many *declensions* and *participles*. I dunno how you do all this smart stuff, it’s making me tense.” Akko paused. “Not intentional. While you’re looking forward in time, can you tell me what the answers are gonna be?”

“I’m not interested in trying to tell the future, Akko.” Diana picked up one of her spice jars, scrutinized it, then set it back down. “I’m trying to look at the present.”

“Maybe you can look at the answer key—”

“Akko, I’m obviously not doing this so you can cheat on a test! What do you *think* this is about?”

Diana’s mouth was set in a hard frown, and her eyes were narrowed. Akko pulled away and flumped back onto her bed. “Well, it’s not because of Amanda, is it?” One finger twirled idly in her hair. She heard a noise from Diana but kept going regardless. “I was kind of thinking it was, but when you got back from talking with her you said you really messed up because of something her mean grandmother did, and that got me thinking that you probably weren’t gonna do anything else to try to help her.”

After a few seconds, Akko heard Diana stand up from her chair, sigh, and walk toward her. Then she felt the weight of her body sink into the bed next to Akko. “And why wouldn’t I do that?” she said.
Akko glanced up to see Diana sitting next to her, looking sidelong. Then Akko closed them again.

“’cuz what if whatever you did was part of that horrible grandmother’s plan?”

“As a counterpoint, what if her plan is for me to do nothing?”

“Ugh, that makes sense too….” The brain-burn was coming back. Akko planted both hands on her face and dragged them down, stretching her skin. “This is so confusing! Fortune telling suuuucks!”

“Especially since fortune tellers don’t make much information public on how they do what they do. Which is why I’m doing what I’m doing,” Diana said, and Akko could hear a little self-satisfied smile in her words. “In a situation this delicate, the most important thing is—”

Something buzzed, and loudly.

“Whose phone is that?” Akko sat up and looked around for the noise. Her phone was on the desk she’d been sitting at, and it wasn’t the buzzer. “Diana, is that your phone, or—” She cut herself off, hand at her mouth, and scrambled over to a pile of papers she’d chucked into a corner. Digging through them, she finally found the orange folder at the bottom, buzzing madly. “It’s the O’Neills.”

“Akko, don’t—” Diana trailed off as Akko immediately opened the folder and scanned its instructions. “I really wish you hadn’t done that,” Diana said. “What if she’s just manipulated you into—what are you doing?”

What Akko was doing was pulling on her shoes and grabbing her wand. “I’ve gotta go!” she said. Her brain-burn was long-forgotten.

“Akko, are you literally just about do what Amanda’s grandmother wants? Immediately after we just talked about this?”

“You also said that doing nothing was a dumb idea too,” Akko said, yanking on her second shoe with some difficulty. “Aw, jeez, did I leave my broom here or in my room—”

Diana positioned herself in front of the door, her arms wide. “That doesn’t mean you should do exactly what she says!”

“I’m not!”

Akko stood up and faced Diana, beaming. “I promise. I saw what she wants me to do, and I promise I’m not gonna do that, okay?”

Diana held her gaze for a moment, then turned away with a look of worry. “I’m… I’m just really worried.”

“Well, we have to do something.” Akko leaned in for a quick forehead-to-forehead touch, almost a headbutt. “You do your thing with the crystal ball, and I’ll do mine. Working together! Just, you know, not together together.”

That was enough to conjure a little snort of amusement from Diana, and her eyes met Akko’s again. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Promise! I’ll have her back before you can say Amanda’s-grandmother-sucks! ”

And with that she jumped past Diana, opened the door, and sprinted to get her broom.
Tiffany closed her eyes. She focused on the sensation of flying, like she had with the Shooting Star. Then she tapped her waistcoat with her wand and murmured, “*Metamorphie vestesse.*”

Something appeared on her head. She opened her eyes with a gasp of excitement, whipped off the new hat to see if it looked like the robes Croix had given her—and saw a multicolored propeller cap. And then she looked down to see that her uniform had become a technicolor nightmare-coat, the kind a clown would find tacky.

With a groan that probably filled the entire dining hall, Tiff dispelled the magic and returned her clothes to normal. It took a few tries, and a few progressively louder groans.

“You seem in good spirits,” Char said from across the lunch table, feet up and chair reclined.

Tiff didn’t dignify that with a response, unless a glare counted: she just got on with digging into her sweet roll.

After a few more seconds, Char spoke up again: “Y’know where Mani is? She said she was going back to the room for… something. Dunno what. Feel like she should be back by now.”

Tiff shrugged violently, as if launching a two-pronged assault upon her own face with her shoulders.

“Right then.” Char reached forward for her own plate of food, but with how she was leaning it was just *too* far away. So she sighed and put her hands behind her head. Under other circumstances, Tiff wondered whether she would have found this *funny*—but under *these* circumstances, she had been doing makeup work nonstop for the past two days, her sleep schedule had become a sleep suggestion at best, and Professor Meridies *still* hadn’t said anything about ending her grounding.

Cabin fever had set in, and comedy wouldn't register if it punched her in the face.

“Oh, there she is now,” Char said, gesturing vaguely.

Tiff pushed the rest of her roll into her mouth, looked around, and saw Mani—holding the Shooting Star, of all things? And gingerly, like it was a lit firecracker; at least *that* part made sense. But to the best of Tiffany’s knowledge, she’d never seen the Shooting Star let itself be held—or even touched—by anyone except herself and Akko. And now Mani was just *carrying* it?

Tiffany gulped down the roll as quickly as she could.

Mani was walking in that hurried, frantic way she had—the kind that always put Tiff in mind of a kid at the pool, not running only because the lifeguard said no. She angled toward Tiff and Char’s table, but Tiff stood and intercepted her. “Mani? Who said you could touch that?” It probably sounded accusatory,

Tiff stopped, thought about the words, and realized they sounded a bit more accusatory than she'd meant. “I mean, like, how are you holding onto that at *all*?” she asked. “Since when does the Star let anyone else touch it?”
“You said her name was Scarlette, right?” Mani looked at Tiff, with an expression Tiff wasn’t sure how to interpret.

“I did, yes. What about it?”

“Scarlette hasn’t moved in two days.”

Tiff blinked.

“It’s not good. It’s like she’s in a…” Mani jiggled her hand a bit. “Long sleep? A comma?”

“Coma.”

“That, yes. It’s scaring me. And I think it happened after you yelled at her. I think you need to—”

“Fine, fine!” Tiff swiped it out of Mani’s hands and started walking toward the nearest exit. “I guess I need to fix this because it’s my fault. Just like it’s my fault for trying to find that O’Neill witch, and my fault for—for everything else! Tiff’s fault for everything!” Goodness, she hoped she wasn’t being too loud… oh, who was she kidding. Students were looking up from their meals at her as she ranted. She was definitely being too loud. Thanks, Scarlette.

Tiff managed to make it out of the dining hall, across the hallway, and into an unoccupied closet: dark, cramped, but most of all private. There, she pinned the Star against a wall. “What do you want from me?”

The Star did not reply. Scarlette didn’t pop out like a mirage.

“What, are you—are you sad you don’t get to fly? Think about how I feel!” Tiff gesticulated with her free hand, knocking over some cleaning equipment. “I had the best gosh darned flying experience in the world, and now I’m stuck in—in this little school, just because some teacher said so? Just because I was trying to help? And now that you’re being all depressed, I can’t do any flying, unless I want to use my old broom! I feel like I’m going out of my mind!”

Tiff’s hands flew up into the air, leaving the broom hanging where she’d left it—floating of its own accord. She paused, and leaned forward. Maybe this was a good sign.

And eventually, it was. Like a TV with bad reception, Scarlette’s image flickered into being after several tries, lighting up the cramped space. It spoke. “Help... me.”

“Help you? HELP you?”

Tiff’s laugh was choked. It felt like comedy had just punched her in the face—and as it turned out, no, it wasn't funny. “Haven't you been paying attention at all over the last two months? I can't help you or anyone else! I mean, let's run through the list, shall we?”

She held out her fingers on one hand, splayed as wide as possible. “I couldn't help Mani with her explosion problem because Professor Chariot saved her instead. I couldn't help her with her flying because Char found her the broom!” With each failure she dropped a finger. “I couldn't help Alice because apparently I wasn't helping her at all, I was saying, 'screw you, I hate you, we shouldn't be friends!' At least that's how she heard it!”

Her teeth gritted. “I couldn't help deal with the ghost, because it kicked all our butts and then Professor Lucre—Professor Lukić had to save us! And I couldn't help that time in Blytonbury, because guess what, I thought I should side with a nutcase!”
“Oh, but wait! I saved Char in the Forbidden Forest!” She put on a fake smile and raised a finger, and then scowled angrily. “Except that I was just serving as a glorified tow truck driver, and I was saving her from a problem I caused! Too bad, zero points!”

She grabbed her index finger and pulled it back down. Now she was out of fingers to lower, and she slammed her clenched fist into the wall. “And now? I can't help Amanda O'Neill. I can't help you. I can't even help myself! So don't ask me to save you! You're talking to the wrong girl!”

Oh, criminy, she was crying. She felt it in the corners of her eyes, and in how her breath was catching as she slumped against the wall. “Can't we just... go flying?” she said. “That was nice. The wind against my face, the world beneath your wings? Feeling like we were helping, even just a little?” She chuckled, or maybe she sobbed. There might not have been a difference. “Feeling a little bit less like a chronic failure?”

She sucked in a huge breath through her nose, beating back the mucus that threatened to moisten her nostrils, and looked up at Scarlette's image. It was still there, still looking at her. “Why me?” Tiff said. “Wouldn't you have had better luck with trying to get any other witch to help you? Why do you think I can do it?” She turned away. “Can't you leave me alone?”

Scarlette didn't have anything to say about that. Tiff let herself sink to the floor, and didn't care how dirty it was.

Gosh, she wondered what Mother would say if she saw Tiffany in a state like this. Would she be mad? Tiffany cringed, and hoped she wouldn't be mad—and then thought she might be disappointed, and cringed even harder.

Maybe she wouldn't do that. That was a nice thought, wasn't it? Maybe she'd just use her warm voice, and make sure Tiffany looked at her, and say something to get Tiffany back on her feet, back into the fight—

“Become... a witch.”

She felt pressure under her chin, and the pressure forced her to look upward. When she did, Tiff saw that the Shooting Star's nose was what was pushing her chin up, and Scarlette was staring at her. She seemed to be concentrating very hard. “I'm going to... become a witch who... saves people,” she whispered, and Tiff could hear the exertion in her tone.

Tiff leaned closer. She'd heard those words, hadn't she?

“I'm going... to become... a witch... who saves everyone.” The exertion seemed to be too much: Scarlette flickered away, and the Shooting Star fell toward the ground.

Tiff reached out and caught it, and stood up. “That's what I said.” Her eyes were like dinner plates. “Right before you saved me from those mandrakes. That—that's why you chose me?”

The Shooting Star lit up again, and Scarlette flickered back into existence. She seemed to be smiling.

Tiff sniffed again, feeling a lump in her throat as she smiled. “I... I don't know what to say. I... you really think I can do this?”

The smile persisted, even as Scarlette flickered.

“All right.” Tiff wiped her eyes on her other forearm. “All right. We're gonna find your missing pieces. And this time, I'm gonna do it right. No more joyriding, unless it's okay with you. And...
I'm sorry for not taking it seriously before.”

She nodded and gripped the Shooting Star tight. “There's someone else I need to apologize to first, though,” she said as she shoved the closet's door open. She looked both ways down the hallway, trying to get her sense of direction straightened out, and then started running.

Now where was Professor Croix?

“ You’re going to tell me that all the preparations have been made. ”

“Yes, Miss Amalthea,” said Mr. O’Neill. “They have been.”

“I see a vision... of you apologizing to me, moments from now, because you’ve realized the need for an economics tutor has slipped through the cracks. ”

“What are you saying, it hasn’t....” Mr. O’Neill flipped through the many, many documents on his tablet. “Oh. Oh dear, so it has. I’m sorry.” He could have sworn he'd covered it, but the data in his digital checklist seemed to confirm otherwise.

“Nevertheless, you were very nearly adequate. Congratulations, David. ”

And it was the damnedest thing. Mr. O’Neill knew that Amalthea didn’t feel that he deserved the congratulation: the woman was essentially an emotionless robot, and if you counted her various medical devices she was more than half plastic by weight. And yet that little token of appreciation, made of fool’s gold as it was, made his day just that little bit better.

“ Though I foresee your competence will not endure,” she added, and he suppressed a sigh. Surely there were other megarich people without this problem, right? “ In fact,” she said, “ I believe that very soon, you will....”

She trailed off, and five seconds later when she still wasn’t talking, he realized his pulse was racing. He had never heard her trail off before. A quick glance at her various monitors showed that yes, her heartbeat was still present and regular. So what could have convinced Amalthea O’Neill to say something different than what she’d intended to say?

At last, she spoke again and the answer came. “ It’s very rude to eavesdrop on other people’s conversations... Diana Cavendish. ”

Before Mr. O’Neill could react to the words, there was a shifting motion beneath Amalthea’s sheets, and he saw the shape of her wand twitch by just a little. A twinkling sphere expanded through the air, centered at the bed and quickly filling the room. As it passed, Mr. O’Neill looked to his side, and his breath hitched: they were not alone.

“Oh,” said the light-haired girl, only half looking at them before turning away. “I suppose it makes sense you’d be able to notice the scrying spell, and reciprocate it. But you won’t be able to end it: I made triply sure of that.” She wore a Luna Nova uniform and appeared to be about Amanda’s age.

“Diana Cavendish,” Mr. O’Neill said. He raised a pointing finger. “How dare you enter our home
without permission?"

“*She’s not in our home, you idiot. She’s using a spell to spy upon us,*” said Amalthea in a typically withering voice. Now that Mr. O’Neill looked closer, Diana was translucent. Off to her side, he saw the outline of a desk and a crystal ball upon it.

“Don’t mind me,” Diana said, with only a veneer of politeness overlaying her words. She stepped slowly around the room, but what she was searching for wasn’t quite clear. “I’ll be out of your hair in a moment. I just need to confirm how you’ve done it.”

“How did you do that?” Mr. O’Neill asked.

“How you’ve abused Amanda throughout her life.”

Gobsmacked as he was, Mr. O’Neill’s jaw didn’t respond to him for a few seconds. When he got back control, all he could do was stammer, “We don’t—how dare you suggest that I—”

“You.”

Amalthea’s voice, as always, cut him off. It was almost sweet, like poisoned candy. “*I hurt her by using you, Cavendish. You haven’t forgotten the role you played in her reclamation from her own worst impulses. You were very helpful to me. To fate.*”

Diana stopped her slow movements for a moment. “You chose those words very carefully.” She sucked in a breath. “I can see why Amanda wouldn’t want to have anything to do with you.”

“And yet you refuse to be content with your small role. You persist against fate,” Amalthea said, her voice rising, “*unaware of how your every movement brings you into its—*”

“Don’t bother,” Diana said, cutting Amalthea off.

Mr. O’Neill gulped. No one had ever cut Amalthea off. And this girl wasn’t even looking at her.

“Everything you say, every order you give, is to be discarded. Not obeyed, not disobeyed, simply discarded. As inconsequential as white noise. That’s what I’ve learned from our last correspondence.” Diana raised a hand. “I’m not here to listen to you. I’m here to look at… move out of the way.”

She flapped her hand at him, and Mr. O’Neill found himself stepping aside—and then, a moment later, looking at what he was stepping aside from. Without particularly meaning to, he’d been standing in front of Amalthea’s famous stock predictions. The ultimate testament to her power, her control.

Diana raised a translucent wand in her translucent hand, and she held it up to the parchment as she peered at it, as if the wand were the only source of light in a darkened room. “Mm. Okay,” she murmured, almost under her breath.

“Little child, you ignore me at your peril—”

“There it is.” And Diana turned away from the parchment to face Amalthea. “I must say, you did a very good job. She wouldn’t ever have found it on her own. But you didn’t expect her to ever become acquainted with someone like me, did you?” There was a little smile on her face. It was polite in every way except for its context.

“Every witch is like you, foolish child. Your titles, your brains, don’t make you any less helpless in
“Amalthea’s hands, under their covers, caught Mr. O’Neill’s eye. Unless his eyes weren’t working, they seemed to be clenched into fists and quivering with rage—but given the person in question, he didn’t believe his eyes. “You cannot stop what is happening to little Amanda, and before long, you’ll realize it was futile to try!”

Mr. O’Neill flinched. Amalthea had never sounded that angry before. But Diana just paused. And then seemed to stifle a laugh.

“I look forward to learning what’s so funny.”

“It’s… nothing much, I suppose,” Diana said. “Just that I was so convinced that I’d gotten it wrong before. That Amanda’s family weren’t anything like my family. But you’re very much like my aunt, in fact.” The mirth left Diana’s eyes. “You’re so scared. Just like her.”

The work was done. Now all that was left was the execution.

“And let me take this chance to restate,” said an echoing voice from a nearby loudspeaker, “that fracking is completely safe, no matter what the liberal news media says. And with that, I’d like to take a moment to thank the O’Neill Group again, for funding the largest hydraulic fracturing rig in the United States of America!”

Amanda snorted, and wiped her brow with one hand: the Texas heat was turning her sweat glands into faucets. The other was holding a detonator.

She should have felt excited. She should have felt righteous.

“Amanda!”

She should have even felt angry, upon hearing that voice. Instead, Amanda slumped to the ground, sitting on a short rock ledge that protruded from the sand. She didn’t bother to look up as Akko’s voice approached from behind. “I know that’s you! Your hair is really recognizable!”

Within a few seconds, Akko had touched down to Amanda’s left, if the crunching of sand was any indication. “You… aren’t running away,” Akko said. “That’s good. I think? You ran away from Andrew and you ran away from Diana and now you’re not running away from me, and on the one hand I’m glad because I get to talk to you but on the other hand I’m wondering if that means you’re not feeling so great, so I dunno if this is good or not, but….”

Amanda let out a breath and slumped, her head almost meeting her knees.

“Amanda?” Akko’s hand tapped her left shoulder. “This is usually the part where I’m talking too much, and you tell me I’m talking too much, and we yell at each other for a bit. You know, with the... banter....”

“D’you think my mom was always awful?”

Akko didn’t have a response to that. Amanda felt a distant urge to smile: the question had worked way better than telling Akko to shut up would have. She put down the detonator from her right
hand, so she could draw her arms about her knees. “I mean.” A pause. “She has to deal with
Granny too. But worse, because she’s her mom. And she’s had to deal with her for longer than me.
Same for my dad, however long they’ve been married. Maybe they used to be… okay?”

The words she spoke were flat, unemotional. She stared into the distance, where there was nothing
but blue sky and orange earth. “Well,” she finally said, dropping her hand to her side. “It doesn’t
matter.”

“Yeah, it really really doesn’t.” Now Akko had stood up and positioned herself in front of Amanda.
“I don’t really know what you’re talking about, but your parents and your granny suck, and I’m
here to take you back to Luna Nova. Not to do what they want. Actually,” she added, a smile of
pride coloring her face, “they told me not to come.” She held out one hand: the other clutched the
broom behind her. “Hop on! There’s room for two and the leyline’s pretty close.”

“Akko…” As she and others so often did around Akko, Amanda sighed. “I’ve still got these,
remember?” She wiggled her shoes. “If I wanted to go back to Luna Nova, I would be there. You
think I wanna go back to however much homework I’ve got saved up?”

“Sure, sure.”

“Don’t sure me, go back to the leyline and buzz off.”

“Not happening.” Akko grabbed her hand. “You’re coming back where you belong.”

“Akko, I’m not interested in—”

“I nearly left Luna Nova too, remember?” Akko stared at her with shining eyes. “Diana actually
did leave. We both had our reasons, and we both were being really dumb and it would have been
the dumbest mistake of our lives. And the reason we’re still there is because someone else snapped
us out of it. What, do you think someone else shouldn’t have snapped us out of it?”

“Sure? I dunno! Maybe if someone hadn’t, you wouldn’t be annoying me all the time!” Amanda
released Akko’s hand in a huff, then turned around and stood up—and inadvertently kicked the
detonator along the sand. Dammit. She started walking.

“Am I… annoying?” Akko sighed. “Okay, dumb question. Why am I annoying this time?”
Amanda heard her footsteps crunch across the baked dirt as she followed a few steps behind
Amanda. “Right before you walked out, you were saying something about… how I used to be cool,
and I wasn’t anymore. Because of the MOP stuff I’m doing.”

Amanda rolled her eyes.

“What, just because I’m trying to make a difference, I’m uncool? How is that uncool?”

“It’s…. Amanda sighed. “I’ve changed my mind, okay? It’s not uncool to try to make a
difference.” She turned around. “But you’re still being dumb.”

“What do you mean?” Akko’s eyebrows made a V.

“You’re so dumb.” Amanda rubbed her forehead again, shaking her head as she did. “You think
you’re gonna change the world by, what, teaching a bunch of kids to make things float? There’s
still people like my grandmother who have all the cards. You’ve gotta take power away from
them, or else they’re gonna control you, and you’re gonna look like an idiot. So save the ‘teach
the world to sing’ stuff, and do something that might make a difference.”
There was the detonator. It had to have skittered a dozen yards across the dirt, toward the tower. Amanda walked briskly that way, leaving Akko behind.

“I… hey!” Akko stomped her foot, and Amanda heard her following again. “I’m not being controlled by anyone!”

“Really.” Amanda stared at her. “Why are you here?”

“Because your grandma told me not to be!”

Amanda sighed. She knew this trick. “And what exactly did she say.”

“That I’d find you in Texas. But that I should absolutely not go to the hydraulic something tower.”

“Oh my god.” Amanda took a breath, and then said it again: “Oh my god. Akko, have you been… tested? I mean, mentally? Because I know you can be a little… completely freaking stupid sometimes, but—” A laugh escaped her gullet, and she covered her face. She wasn’t sure whether it was a laugh of hilarity or despair. Of course. Of course, Akko had been tricked in the most blatantly obvious way possible. Of course she’d shown up as soon as Amanda had started feeling even the slightest shred of vulnerability. Right on cue.

Akko squinted.

“Newsflash, Akko. She told you not to come here because she wanted you to come here. It’s the most basic reverse psychology in the… it’s not even in the book! It doesn’t need to be in the book!” She gesticulated wildly. “You should know this without needing the book!”

Akko wasn’t squinting anymore. “No… I didn’t mean to—”

“You didn’t think, did you? You never think, you just… do things! It really is just like having two Dianas!” Amanda bent down and swiped the detonator from the ground, and stared at it. “Well, I’ve thought this through. And I know what I’m doing.”

“Sorry, I just… agh!” Akko smacked herself in the face, judging by the meaty slap Amanda heard. “I’m doing exactly what she wants! I’ve gotta go before I do something to you.”

“Yeah.” Amanda found the on button and clicked it. The screen showed a timer. The timer started counting down. “And you should probably do it within about five minutes. Just saying.”

“Okay, sorry, I’ll get….” Akko stopped talking for several seconds. When she spoke again, her tone was low and cautious. “Why five minutes.”

Amanda got a sinking feeling in her gut, like she’d swallowed a gallon of ice. “Okay, you know what? Ignore that last part. Just get going whenever you feel like it. By which I mean, now.” She looked up, not very hopeful, and saw Akko staring at her, dashing even those slight hopes. “Don’t worry about it,” she said, and held the detonator behind her back. “Just get out of here.”

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“What did you just press? I saw you click it, I saw you put it behind your back. What happens in five minutes?”
Before Amanda could stop her, Akko jumped on her broom and flew closer to the tower instead of away. “Akko, I swear to God,” Amanda hissed, pulling out her wand, “if you don’t get the hell out of here right now —”

“These look like bombs. Amanda? These really look like bombs, please tell me they’re not bombs.”

Amanda ran over. “Akko. Leave. This doesn’t affect you.”

“You’re planning to blow up a building and this doesn’t affect me?”

“You say that like it’s some sort of horrible crime.”

“It is —”

“No, it’s just a regular crime!” Amanda held her arms out, as if she’d once caught a fish this big. “Fracking sucks, my family sucks, so blowing up my family’s fracking tower is a win-win! And all the people are over there at the ceremony, they’re far enough away that no one’s gonna get hurt as long as you get going!”

“I know what fracking is, Amanda. I know I’m stupid, but I know that much!” Akko stomped her foot. “I know that it’s about getting oil out of the ground! How much oil is gonna be blown up by this, Amanda? Do you know how big the boom is gonna be?”

“Uh….” Amanda stuttered. “You said you were gonna leave, remember? You said you weren’t gonna be my granny’s pawn.” She pointed her wand at Akko. “So leave. Last warning.”

“I’m not being your grandmother’s pawn. But I won’t let you hurt anyone, Amanda, no matter how much you’re hurting.” Akko held out her hand. “Just… give me the detonator. Or switch it off. There’s an off switch, right? Let’s talk about this.”

“It doesn’t matter if you want to do this! What matters is that she wants you to!” Amanda snarled, and a jet of light sailed past Akko’s head—a deliberate wide shot. “Get out, Akko! Now!”

But Amanda’s heart sank as Akko’s jaw clenched. “I’m sorry,” Quick as a striking snake, her wand was in her hand, and she screamed, “Veni!”

The detonator flew out of Amanda’s hand—her reflexes kicked in and she grabbed for it, but she wasn’t fast enough. She snarled and ran after it anyway, and kicked her feet against each other as she moved. One, two, three —

She reappeared behind Akko and kneed her in the small of the back. “That’s how it feels!” she yelled, swiping the detonator out of the air again. She clicked her heels again, and stepped once, twice—

“Metamorphie faciesse!”

The detonator stopped being a circular gadget and started being all small and wriggly, and it crawled out of her hand as she was taking the third step. She looked around, but the momentum was taking her to her planned destination, and in a second she was on a busy South Korean street, outside a nightclub she’d scouted as a safe location. The arid heat was gone.

She growled, kicked her foot, and danced in place—she was back at the tower, blasted in the face with the desert sun, and Akko was running away with a squealing mouse in her pocket. Oh, and she was also sending fireworks into the sky. “Get out of here!” she was yelling, her voice amplified
by her wand. “There’s a bomb! Move, move!” Her broom was in her other hand.

With a snarl, Amanda ran at her, but Akko jumped onto her broom and flew almost vertically. Amanda stopped short as Akko ascended—she had never tried stepping to anywhere in midair, and she was pretty sure that she wouldn’t be able to step again until she landed—

But there was nothing else for it. Akko pulled the mouse from her pocket and tapped it with her wand, transforming it back into the detonator. “Where’s the off switch?” she yelled to herself.

Amanda shook herself, then kicked her foot and ran. Three steps later—the wind was in her ears, and she was skydiving several yards above Akko. She angled her body and braced for impact.

Akko glanced up, but not in time: Amanda slammed bodily into her, knocking her off the broom and sending it, her, and the detonator into freefall. Amanda smirked, tucked her arms against her sides, and dove into the broom. As soon as she had control, she swerved up and grabbed the tumbling detonator out of the air.

“You won’t get rid of me that easily! Metamorphie faciesse!”

Amanda glanced over her shoulder, just in time to see Akko pointing her wand at herself. A cloud of smoke burst around her, and in the haze Amanda saw wings. She rolled her eyes, at least until the wings suddenly exploded outward, growing to a twenty foot wingspan. Then Amanda's eyes went wide as satellite dishes. “Did you just turn into a—”

“RAWK!” screeched the roc.

“Oh, shit!” Amanda divebombed toward the ground.

Croix was a fast worker if nothing else. “Change a class to public here, explicitly cast a variable to the correct type there, add some brackets—for purely stylistic reasons—and that should be it.”

With a little hmph of triumph, she pushed her keyboard off her lap. The droid on the other end of the line disconnected its USB from Constanze’s laptop, and then hovered it closer to Constanze. “It’s amazing, the kind of errors you overlook when you’re exhausted,” Croix said. “Try this.”

Constanze frowned, but clicked the Build button. A few seconds later, her eyes widened: the code had compiled without any errors. Her hand shot to the mouse and ran it, with the urgency of a starving man at a banquet.

Around her was a flurry of motion: Croix’s droids swarmed the lab like bees in a hive. They’d taken a look at Constanze’s schematics for the transmitter, and now they were finishing it up. Jasminka was still providing some help—and the usefulness of her freakish strength couldn’t be overstated—but by and large it was the semi-autonomous fleet that was completing the work, faster than Constanze and Jasminka could have on their own.

“One small thing,” Croix added, as Constanze’s eyes were glued to the screen. “I made some small changes to the breadth of your search function. And by small changes, I mean of course—”
Ping, went her droid.

“I mean of course severe restrictions,” Croix finished. Constanze’s eyes unglued themselves from
the screen and she glanced up at Croix in surprise. “Specifically, I’m only having them look for all
the photos and videos on the internet that are recent, and which already have something to do
with the O’Neill family.”

Constanze’s glance became a glare.

“Don’t give me that look.” Croix glared right back. “First of all, it’ll run faster this way. Second of
all, we know from Diana that she’s bringing herself specifically to O’Neill establishments. And
finally, do you want Akko to yell at you for running a one-woman surveillance state? I promise
it’s—”

Ping, went her droid again.

“It’s not fun.” Her teeth were gritted. The message alert had hit her twice now, but it could wait.

Constanze’s expression softened, but that might have been because her attention was being drawn
back to the screen. Results were showing up there. Results showing an orange-haired girl and a
brown-haired one in the desert. Constanze nodded once, typed feverishly, and leaned close to the
screen.

“Texas,” Croix read off. “And, oh dear, what are she and Akko doing there? Fighting?” She
groaned. “Typical of them. I guess we don’t have any time to—”

Ping.

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Teeth gritted, Croix turned away from the screen and made a gesture to
bring up a holographic display. Who, at this important time, could possibly think that pinging her
was a good idea? Yes, sure, she did have droids roving the school to make her easier to get in touch
with, but who —

From: Tiffany Vandergard

Subject Line: I’m sorry

Croix’s teeth separated. She sucked in a breath, then said, “I’ll be right back,” and her hologram
blipped out of Constanze’s lab. For a moment she found herself back in the tent where she’d made
camp in India, and then she activated the projector on the relevant droid at Luna Nova, and—

“You rang?” she said, finding herself directly in front of Tiffany Vandergard.

“Yee!” Tiff jumped back. Merely describing her as ‘on edge’ seemed like it would be a disservice
to the English language, but… Croix was Italian. So, as she stared at Tiff, Croix noted that she
seemed on edge.

They were in an alcove, Croix noted, in one of the most remote corners of the school: high up a
tower that wasn’t used much anymore—and quite far from the first year dorms. Great view. Of
course, most of Croix’s droids had been relegated to building duty in Constanze’s lab, so only a
few remained patrolling the grounds. Possibly even the one she’d stationed outside Tiff’s window
had been reassigned. So, Tiff had to have put in some legwork to contact her, and the sweat on her
face bore this out.

Tiff hadn’t spoken yet, and it had been several seconds. Croix smiled, to try to put her at ease. If
Tiff was sorry—

“I… don’t know if I’m going to say this the way I want to say it,” Tiff said. She was clutching the Shooting Star like a teddy bear, although most teddy bears were softer and shorter and didn’t have a GPS attached. “I was thinking I would try to write a letter, or an email, or something, and then I couldn’t find the words for that, and now it looks like I have to say it in person, and now I feel like I’m rambling but—you were right.”

“Tiffany,” Croix said, still smiling.

“I was being selfish and dumb and I was disappointing my family name, and I wasn’t helping Amanda O’Neill at all and I definitely wasn’t helping her—I mean, this,” she said, hefting the Star. Her face bore the flush of someone whose mouth had just executed a buffer overflow attack on her brain, and disgorged memory that she’d have rather kept private. “I was misusing an incredible magical artifact for joyrides, just to try and make myself feel better. And… I should have been helping instead.”

“Tiffany.” Croix’s smile was wearing off.

“So that’s why I’m saying I’m sorry, and… I hope you’ll let me try to help find Amanda O’Neill again. Because, like… I’m here to help. And if I’m not helping, then I might as well not be—”

“Tiffany,” Croix said, loud enough and annoyed enough to cut her off. “I have two words for you.”

Tiff gulped.

“Metamorphie vestesse.”

And then Tiff’s eyes went wide, as a jet of light shot out of the droid, and her clothes went poof, and turned into a spectacular white set. “Your timing was perfect,” Croix said, with a little smile: she hoped she hadn’t sounded too annoyed just then. This caring business really demanded a lot of finesse. “Amanda’s been found. I’ll send the coordinates to your GPS, and you can take the leyline there. Go help Amanda—and the witch inside that broom,” she added with a wink.

Tiff’s breath hitched. “You know about Scarlette?”

Croix tried to look smug instead of surprised, which was a little difficult because she was also busy typing in the GPS coordinates on a virtual keyboard. “When I outfitted that broom for its GPS I did a cursory scan, and found a magical signature suitable for a person, not a broom. Thanks for telling me the person in question is an Olde Witch.”

Tiff sagged a little.

“Makes sense that another one of them would be sticking around. So, you’re helping her?” Croix leaned forward, feeling a little cold inside. “She’s got you on some sort of magical destiny quest, has she?”

“What—I suppose?” Tiff clutched the Star a little closer, as if she’d sensed some of how Croix felt about that broom. “I don’t know about any destiny, though. I don’t know if I’d care if I did, but she’s hurting and she needs help.”

“Mm.” Croix nodded slowly. “Then you’re smarter than I was at your age.” Before Tiff could respond to that, Croix flapped her hand. “Get going. You don’t have time to lose! Carpe Amanda!”
“Uh, right!” Tiff jumped on her broom, fumbled with a window to get it open, and shouted, “Tia freyre!” And then she didn’t so much move as vanish: Croix whipped her head around and maybe, maybe saw a speck in the sky behind her, before that vanished too—if it hadn’t been an artifact of perception.

Croix smiled. Then she shook her head and switched her hologram back to Constanze’s lab. Time to focus on Amanda again. (One of these days she would have to ask Chariot how she managed to care about everyone, apparently all the time! It was exhausting) “How’s it looking?” she said, and then looked around. “Where’s Jasminka?”

The transmitter was complete. It must have finished in the five minutes she’d spent with Tiff. The only other person in the lab now was Constanze, and she jabbed a finger at a seat that Croix recognized as an emergency exit. “Ah. Going after Amanda herself.”

Constanze shook her head sharply, efficiently.

“Okay….” Croix pursed her lips. “Are you going after her?”

With a single downward jab of her finger, Constanze indicated that she was staying right here — unless Croix was misreading her, which was a real option considering her people skills plus Constanze’s communication skills.

“And why are you staying right here?”

Constanze made a complicated series of gestures that could have been anything between a complete and satisfying explanation, an expletive-ridden rant, or a dance move.

“Nevermind. I’m going after her.” Croix turned around to leave—a mostly symbolic gesture, since her physical body wasn’t going anywhere. “I’ll leave some droids here in case you need them.”

She blipped out, and was back in her tent in the Indian Ghats. And then she frowned. Why shouldn’t her physical body be going anywhere? Come to think of it, this could require a little personal touch.

Diana was continuing to examine Amalthea’s bedroom. Amalthea was continuing to make barely veiled threats against her person. And Amanda’s father was continuing to do nothing much at all, except occasionally blubber. Things had settled nicely into a rhythm.

“You’ll leave my room quite soon, little girl,” said the venom-laced voice from all around Diana, as she peered at the collection of music boxes at Amalthea’s bedside.

“I’m quite interested in the phrasing you’ve been using,” Diana murmured. “Never imperatives. Always the future tense. You never want to imply that you’re giving orders, because how would that make sense for someone who can see the future?”

Amalthea’s body shifted a little, and if Diana was right, it was out of rage. Yet her next words were cool. “Always using that big brain of yours, always trying to be helpful. How delightfully naive.”
“I don’t have the faintest notion of what you mean.”

“Oh, my apologies,” said the voice, as far away from sounding apologetic as a voice could get. “I’ve just looked forward in time to the point where you realize that none of them care.”

Diana kept carefully focused on the music boxes.

“All that time and effort, brainpower and money spent rebuilding the Cavendish name... when the truth is, your family will never care. The ones who are still alive, like that dear aunt you brought up, are too proud to love you for it. And Mommy and Daddy are too dead to love you for it.”

“Please be quiet,” Diana said. She just barely managed not to raise her voice.

“Little Diana Cavendish,” the voice went on. There was glee in that voice: the glee of a gambler on a winning streak. “Carrying a dying torch from a dying mother, trying desperately to breathe life into it, and no one will even —”

The door burst open. Not the door to Amalthea’s bedroom, but the door to Diana’s. Diana whipped around at the noise and saw Jasminka standing in the doorway, and then remembered that the door had been locked. The only remaining evidence for this fact was the hole in the door jamb where the lock had been. “Diana,” Jasminka started, “I need you to—”, and then she stopped as she saw the scrying spell.

“Jasminka Antonenko. The fatty.” Amalthea’s voice sounded just as gleeful as before. “Aren’t you delighted to finally meet me, and under such auspicious circumstances. You’re excited to learn Amanda will soon be coming back to her family, as I’ve foretold again and again. I’ll happily hear your thoughts on this matter.”

Jasminka stepped forward. She wasn’t smiling. Her eyes were open. Diana wasn’t sure she’d seen that before.

“I’m waiting,” Amalthea prompted.

And then, Jasminka’s face went dark. “You,” she said, walking past Diana’s desk, “can go,” she said, grabbing the crystal ball off the desk, “to hell!”

She flung the crystal ball right at Amalthea’s projected face. It went through and smashed against the floor, sending shards of crystal all over the room like a miniature snowstorm.

The scrying spell disappeared.

Diana stared open-mouthed at Jasminka. She never would have thought to use the words Jasminka and murderous in the same sentence, but—Jasminka looked murderous. She looked as if, had that frail old woman been lying before her in fact and not just in image, she would have thrown that giant heavy ball through her skull all the same. Jasminka panted, almost snarling—

And then she closed her eyes and her expression went neutral. “Sorry about that,” she said, turning to Diana. “I just had to throw something.”

“Right,” Diana said. She could have said more, perhaps on the subject of the cost of the antique crystal ball Jasminka had shattered into a million pieces—but that was also the reason why she wouldn’t say anything of the sort. Someone who could take something with the weight of a bowling ball, and throw it as if it were a baseball, was not someone whom Diana wished to have any argument with. “Amanda?” she said instead, weakly.
“Right!” Jasminka’s posture straightened up. “We’ve found her. You need to go.”

“Akko’s handling it—”

“Did Amalthea send her?”

“In a manner of speaking—”

“You need to go,” Jasminka repeated, a touch louder. “You and anyone else that Amalthea’s not sending.”

“Right,” Diana said again. She raised her wand and let her broom fly to her. “I suppose I’ll follow you—”

“I’ll tell you where,” Jasminka said, already walking out of the room. “But I stay here.”

“What—why?” Diana said, rushing after her. “That seems exceedingly contradictory!”

Jasminka stared at her with her eyes closed. “Amanda’s always been running away. She needs somewhere to run to.”

So. Akko was a mythological bird of prey with a wingspan wider than the average limo was long. Totally fine. Totally fine.

Amanda dove on the stolen broom, swearing copiously under her breath, and made it to the ground within seconds. She hit the dirt hard, rolled, then kicked her foot and took two steps before a huge claw closed around her back. She yelped in pain as it lifted her off the ground. “Are you kidding me?” she yelled.

“Eeeee ooo!” the roc screamed. Amanda was pretty sure the words she was going for were “Let go!”, but she didn’t have the mouth for it at that moment. The claw shook her, trying to shake the detonator from her hand.

On the one hand, she didn’t have to worry about losing her grip: Akko’s claw was tightly around both her arms. On the other, this made using magic, or doing anything else to escape, kind of a problem. “I can’t let go, you nitwit! You’ve got my arms!”

Akko screeched again, flapped mightily to gain height, then tossed Amanda into the air. Amanda managed not to scream, whipped out her wand, and yelled, “Murowa!” But with another burst of smoke, the roc vanished, and the green jet sailed harmlessly through the smoke.

A second later, some sort of falcon zipped out of the cloud, and its claws went right for the detonator. “Oh no you don’t!” Amanda yelled, but as she redirected her wand, the falcon transformed back into Akko. Her friend Akko, looking her straight in the eyes.

Her friend Akko, who she was pointing a wand at because Akko wouldn’t let her blow something up. Because Akko wouldn’t let her hurt people.

In that moment, Akko yanked the detonator from her hand, then pulled her close. “Metamorphie
She yelled, and Amanda found herself in yet another cloud of smoke, and then atop something broad and rough. When it cleared, she looked down to see an elephant with Dumbo-sized ears, and the ears flared like parachutes as they caught the air. The deceleration force ground Amanda into the elephant’s skin.

They landed hard. Amanda slid off and fell the several feet from the elephant’s back to the ground. Akko held up the detonator in her trunk, tossed it in the air, and when it came down she caught it in her human hand. “Are we done? Is the fight done now? Okay, then just tell me which button turns it off.” Her voice trailed away. “Is it supposed to be cracked like this?”

For the second time that minute, Amanda felt dawning horror in the pit of her stomach. She shoved herself to her feet and blipped to Akko’s side, where she saw that the whole detonator had a massive fissure through it. Amanda grabbed it and pressed the Cancel button, five times in a row, but it didn’t seem to be working.

She and Akko looked at each other.

“Um…” Akko looked at her, then looked at the tower, then looked at the crowd of fleeing people. People who might not have been far enough away. “I think I’ve seen this in some movies. You can—you can freeze bombs and they stop working. Diana taught me a freezing spell the other week.”

“*That’s* your plan?”

“Well, do *you* know how to disarm a bomb?” Akko stepped closer to Amanda. “Seriously though, do you? Because it would be really helpful right about now! Come on, we can fix this! You and me!”

“I—”

“Come on, Amanda, *now*!”

“I can’t.”

“Fine, then I’ll show you how to freeze it—”

“I can’t do *anything.*” Amanda stepped back. Her vision was bleary, her words were slurred by the lump in her throat. “Whatever I do it just keeps playing into her hands. She’s turning me into someone who doesn’t care about hurting people. Someone who’d hurt you just so I could hurt someone else. She’s turning me into *her.*” She rubbed the heel of her palm across her eyelids. “She’s won. I can’t…”

“You’re talking about *that?* There’s people *now* who are about to get hurt!” Akko jabbed a finger at the tower. “I don’t *care* about your grandma, and I don’t *care* about your future!” Then she pressed a frantic hand to her mouth. “No, that came out wrong, I mean—”

“I’ve gotta go.” Amanda took several more steps backward, feeling the moisture in her eyes, and clumsily pushed one foot against the other. She had to run. It was all she knew how to do. “I’m sorry, I can’t, I—”

One step.

“Amanda, *help me!*” But even as Akko reached out her arm halfway, she gritted her teeth, then turned on her heel and ran hell-for-leather at the tower. A jet of magic summoned her broom back to her, and Akko flew.
Two steps.

There was something in the corner of Amanda’s eye.

Three st—

She went sprawling, tumbling across the dirt, and pain lanced up her left leg. A second later, a deafening *boom* smashed into her ears, making her cringe—a sonic boom. And when she looked down at her left foot, it was bare.

“*Got it!*” Tiff yelled, streaking across the Texan landscape—no, hang on, probably the Oklahoman landscape at this point. Or the next state beyond that. The boots were sailing along behind her, grabbed by her strongest summoning spell—

She glanced back and saw only one boot, flying behind her as if dragged by an invisible fishing line.

“I only got one!” she yelled down at Scarlette, but Scarlette didn’t seem to be paying attention. “We need to slow down!”

“*Got it!*” Scarlette was repeating. Joy filled her face. She wasn’t paying attention to anything else.

“We *don’t* have it!” Tiff yelled. “Now slow down slow down slow down —”

“*Arctica! Arctica!* Work with me, you *stupid* desert! *Arctica!*”

Akko had never tried the freezing spell outside of the library. She’d certainly never tried it in ninety degree weather, and she’d absolutely never done it while next to enough explosives to send her sky high—and just as far away in every other direction. But like the saying went, necessity was the mother of *not getting blown to smithereens*.

At least she hoped so. She really really hoped so. “*Arctica!*”

The cocoon of ice around the main body of explosives grew larger, by inches each time she said it. But *less* inches each time: the bigger it got, the longer it took to add new ice. And the screen on Amanda’s detonator remote was broken: there was no longer any timer. She didn’t know how long she had.

She took a few panting breaths—she’d been screaming a lot—and then opened her mouth wide. “*Arcticaaaaaaaaaaa!*”

A continuous stream of bluish-white energy shot from her wand, and kept going as her vocal cords strained. She had to keep it up, she had to—
“What the hell are you doing?”

Akko coughed and sputtered. After a few seconds, she turned around.

“Is that a bomb under there?” Professor Croix said, here in hologram form as usual, her projector droid flanked by two more. “Amanda really went off the deep end, then?”

“I’m not—” Akko wheezed, and started over. “I’m not in the mood, Croix.”

“Is that a bomb,” Croix repeated.

“Yes! And I need to deal with it or people could get hurt!”

“And by ‘people’ you mean yourself? Since you’re the only one standing next to it and the mountain of potential shrapnel you’ve created?”

Croix’s hologram hovered down to the ice mound surrounding the bomb, and a beam of light scanned the ice. Croix groaned. “Congratulations! Without a cold enough application of ice, all you’ve managed to do is make it harder to deal with the explosion. Do you even know how to disarm a bomb?” she said, glaring at Akko.

Akko glared right back. “What, do you?”

“Yes!”

That shut Akko up for a second. “Why do you—”

“Do you want to waste time on that question, or would you rather go after Amanda while I do this?” Croix floated forward, looming over Akko. Akko kept her ground. After a second, Croix groaned and pressed her fingers into her forehead. “Akko, I know you don’t trust me. I know you’re right not to trust me. But if disarming this thing fails, one of us is going to be fine, and the other is going to be dead.” She hovered down, not quite at Akko’s height level, but closer. And her expression softened. “And I don’t want to see you dead.”

Akko breathed heavily for a few seconds more. “Really?”

“Of course. Chariot would be devastated.”

Akko kept staring. Croix raised her arms in a shrug, pure irritation written all over her face. “What? You’re clearly not about to trust I care about you for your own sake, whether it’s true or not. Now, get going!”

Akko looked over her shoulder at where Amanda had gone, and then back at Croix. Then she waved her wand. “Veni.” Her broom flew to her. “I’m trusting you, right now,” she said, mounting her broom. “Don’t make that the second stupidest thing I’ve done today.”

She spun around, mounted her broom, and yelled, “Tia freyre!” then leaned forward to speed across the landscape. She glanced over her shoulder once, to see Croix crouching next to the mound of ice, with her droids melting it on either side. Then she didn’t look back.
It felt like dying.

Amanda kicked her boot savagely into her bare foot—which had become blotchy and bruised—walked three steps, and then screamed as quietly as she could. With each blip, she wasn’t traveling the thousands of miles she’d gotten used to: it seemed that she needed two boots for that. No, she was going maybe a half mile, maybe two thirds of a mile, at a time. And each time came with a cost.

Amanda collapsed on the sand, clutching her leg. It had hurt before, when she’d used the one boot to attack Diana, and she’d only teleported once. Now she was teleporting a dozen times in a row, and it felt like the boot was trying to rip her to pieces. She couldn’t stop herself from staring down at what had happened to her leg, visible in gloriously gory detail between the bottom of her shorts and her remaining boot. Rings of crimson ran around it, as if it were a spiral cut of ham. It was as if her leg was being pulled apart, and pulled off, all at once.

With a whimpered spell, Amanda dragged her wand along the wound, closing it up as best as she could. But then she limped another three steps, and blipped again, and screamed.

It felt like dying. She felt like dying.

The sun beat down on her, sprawled upon the ground. She needed shade, because the heat was cooking her brain and she couldn’t even think. She forced herself to look up from the sand, and through bleary eyes she saw a pillar of rock—the kind that just happened to be in random spots in the desert. There was shade to one side.

Amanda clenched her jaw, and kicked at her foot, and ran there. It took two more teleports to make it. Then she collapsed against the rock, the blessedly cool rock of the pillar, and panted. And let out a quiet moan, really more a rattle, of pain. Her leg was painted in stripes of agony, and though she whispered the healing spell and held her wandpoint against the cuts, they didn’t seem to want to heal. She’d done too much damage.

There was nothing left, was there? Nothing at all was left for her. Every bridge had been better than burned: she’d laid the wire, and planted the bombs, and detonated them. And she’d basically done it all on her own, destiny or no.

She cried. Very, very quietly, she cried. The desert swallowed up the noise.

So absorbed was she in her pain that it took a while to notice the other noise, but eventually she did. The droning noise finally drilled its way into her head, and she looked up and wiped her eyes. It was the only other sound she could hear besides herself, and she craned her neck trying to locate it… it sounded like a mosquito, if a mosquito was a hundred feet long—

Her eyes bugged out as she saw the plane. “What?” she gasped.
It was small, maybe a little smaller than the one her parents had: a personal plane for the rich. Its nose was pointed right at her, and it was getting louder. She clamped her hands upon her ears and yelled, as the plane came down. Who the hell was this—and if they knew she was here, then—

The plane landed, maybe a hundred feet away, and the noise of the engines stopped before Amanda’s eardrums burst—just before, it felt like. Wincing in pain, Amanda willed herself to focus as she stood, her back against the wall. Who the hell… she was too tired, too worn out to finish the question in her head. Just… who the hell?

The door opened, with its inside serving as stairs as it hit the sand. And who should show up in the doorway but—“Andrew?” Amanda had to squint: it was much brighter outside the plane than inside it, and since he hadn’t left it yet, she could make out little more than a silhouette.

“Amanda,” he said, and there was nothing positive in his voice. He walked down the stairs. “I’m sorry.” The large man behind him maintained a close distance, far too close for personal space, and his silhouette engulfed Andrew’s.

Two more pairs came out: Frank and then the one whose name started with L, and each one had their own security detail—except that it didn’t seem that the large men were there to protect them. Just the opposite. They stood in the kind of proximity that had violence written all over it: they might as well have been holding Andrew and his friends at gunpoint.

And the final person walked out of the airplane, and Amanda’s breath didn’t even hitch. Of course it was her mother. “Amanda,” she cooed, and walked forward slowly, her jewelry jingling as she went. “Amanda Panda, you’re actually here! I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you.”

No, Amanda thought with the last part of her head that was capable of humor, I bet you can’t. She pressed herself against the wall, heaving breaths, trying to keep her weight off her left leg.

“Amanda, sweetie pie, it’s okay,” Mrs. O’Neill said, walking closer. Her voice was so saccharine that flies should have been forming a cloud around her. “It’s all okay, we’ll cover it up for you. No one has to know you did anything bad, as long as you just come home with me. We can be together and everything will be fine. Just….” She took another step. “Come home, Amanda Panda.”

Amanda couldn’t back up. But her mother could step forward. “Please,” she said, reaching out her hand, “don’t make this harder than it needs to—”

“Murowa! Metamorphie faciesse!”

Amanda’s gaze jerked upward, just in time to see two jets of light fly from the sky. One struck the man holding Frank hostage, sending him flying five feet and laying him out on the ground. The other hit the man behind that one asshole whose name started with an L, and his eyes went wide, and then he wasn’t there anymore—and then a squirrel ran out from behind the asshole’s legs. If ever a squirrel had looked confused, this one did.

Akko’s broom screeched to a halt right next to the squirrel, and Akko jumped off and punted it toward the horizon, and it squeaked all the way as it flew. And then she leveled her wand at Mrs. O’Neill. “You,” she spat.

The man next to Andrew grabbed him in a headlock, and looked at Akko in a threatening kind of way. Akko didn’t move her wand. “I don’t wanna hurt you,” she said. “I wanna hurt her.”

“Oh, Ms. Kagari.” Mrs. O’Neill rolled her eyes and turned around. “Don’t you have anything better to do than intrude in our family meetings?”
“You lied to me!” Akko’s wand-hand shook. “You said you wanted to help her! Amanda,” she yelled, glancing past Mrs. O’Neill to look at Amanda, “get out of here!”

And one glance was all it took.

Amanda’s cry of warning died on her lips, as her mother moved with a speed that defied her heavy-set frame. No one spent any kind of time being taught by Amalthea O’Neill without learning a few things, and Amanda knew her mother was no exception: the wand came out, and she cried, “Evomo!”

The ground around Akko erupted, a towering geyser of sand that flung her wailing into the air, and her wand flew from her hand. By the time she was on her way down, Mrs. O’Neill had cast a second spell: Akko landed in a cage, the top of which swung shut over her head. Her wand landed outside the cage. “There we go,” Mrs. O’Neill said, her voice as rancid and fake-nice as ever. “Wouldn’t want you to do something we’d all regret, would I?”

Akko glared at her. “You’re the worst mom ever.”


Amanda summoned up the energy she had left. She kicked at her bare foot, she ran three steps in place—and she wasn’t at the bottom of the pillar of rock anymore. She was at the top. She gritted her teeth against the renewed surge of pain, but she was at least alone.

“Really, Amanda Panda,” said the voice. Moments later, her mother was back up. Akko’s broom was in her hand. “I’m not that scary, am I?” Then her eyebrows slanted: there wasn’t anyone else right here to see them, after all, and her mother only kept up the act next to company. “But if you don’t come back home right now, I swear that I will be!”

But the truth was that Amanda wasn’t scared—not of her. “Stay away,” she said, her voice shaky, and she held up her wand.

Mrs. O’Neill gasped. To her very very minor credit, she actually looked hurt. Her voice, however, remained shrill. “Dear. Are you saying you’d try to attack me? After we’ve gone to all this trouble to find you? Your father’s been worried sick, and I’ve been absolutely beside myself! And just now when I’ve found you, and I think you’re finally about to see things our way, you’re up to your same old tricks?”

Amanda’s wand-hand trembled. Then she let it drop.

“That’s right.” Now Mrs. O’Neill smiled again, and walked closer. “We can put all this behind us, and—”

And then Amanda grabbed the wand with both hands and brought it up again—pointing at her own head. “One step closer,” she said, staggering back. “One step closer and I swear... you won’t be able to bring me home.”

She took another step, and felt her bare foot’s heel over thin air. She gulped, and focused on staying steady, despite the pain of her leg.

It was the damnedest thing. Pain coursed through her like blood, everything had gone to shit, and her family was there, yet now of all times she felt better. Content. Like, for once, she could do something that mattered.
And the dawning horror in her mother’s eyes was beautiful. “Amanda?” she said, and the word caught in her throat. “You can’t possibly mean—”

“If the spell I use doesn’t get me,” Amanda said, and then had to take a breath. Her heart pounded. “If the spell doesn’t, doesn’t kill me, then the fall will.” She let her off hand fall, only holding the wand with one. “Not even destiny can stop that. Not even Granny.”

“Panda, you wouldn’t—”

“You’ve spent your whole life treating me like shit,” Amanda breathed, but her voice kept getting louder and louder. “Your whole life making sure I didn’t get to have any choices, and now I finally get to make a choice, and you think I wouldn’t take it? Are you kidding me, you stupid bitch?”

“How dare you talk to your mother that way!”

But Amanda wasn’t talking to her mother. She looked forward and saw the whole O’Neill machine. She saw her grandmother, and she saw every bit of wire surrounding her, every bit of the spider’s web—she saw those wires extending, reaching for her, making to curl around her limbs and draw her in.

Amanda let out a breath. “There’s nothing else to do. There’s no future for me.” Her arm tensed. “Tell Granny that you made this happen—all of you—” she laughed. “Ah, what the hell. She knows.”

She sucked in a breath, got ready to cast the spell—

“Stop!”

That wasn’t her mother’s voice. Amanda looked up. So did her mother, who snarled and raised her wand with a cry of, “Who do you think you—”

A ray of light blasted down from on high, knocking the wand out of Mrs. O’Neill’s hand. It flew skyward, and Amanda followed its arc up into the hand of Diana Cavendish. She grabbed it out of the air, diving on her broom, and landed hard. “Get out,” she said, glaring at Mrs. O’Neill.

“How dare you!” Mrs. O’Neill stalked forward, jingling furiously. “Give me back my wand right now, or—”

“Murowa maxima,” Diana said. A brighter jet of light blasted down, just in front of Mrs. O’Neill’s feet. She yelped and jumped back. “Don’t move again, or I’ll aim higher,” Diana said, pocketing Mrs. O’Neill’s wand but keeping her own pointed at the woman. Then her gaze focused on Amanda. “They’ve been lying to you, Amanda. All your life. Stop listening to them.”

Amanda just stared.

“Amalthea O’Neill isn’t as perfect of a fortune teller as you think. Your family’s done a very good job of fooling the world, and of fooling you, but they’re lying. You’ve got more choices than you think.”

“What? What are you even doing here?”

Diana wasn’t wearing her usual composed mask. “You said I didn’t think last time. Well, this is me using my brain. I can prove to you that your grandmother is a fraud, so put that wand down.” Her eyes burned with unusual determination—Amanda had thought Akko was acting more like Diana, but now it looked like it was the other way around.
Not that it mattered. “Are you crazy?” Amanda kept the wand steady, brushing up against her hair. “You think she can’t see the future? She's been doing it for a hundred years! You haven’t seen that big board of hers, have you!”

“Yes, I have. That’s why I’m here.” Then Diana started muttering quickly under her breath, and drew her wand through the air in the shape of a large rectangle. “Here it is,” she said, as the big stock market board shimmered into half-existence in front of her, translucent enough that Amanda could still see her behind it. “The instrument of, and monument to, your family’s success. How often, I wonder, have you really looked at it? How often has anyone really looked, without being cowed by your grandmother, I mean?”

“What do you mean?”

“The answer is, probably, not often. Otherwise you might have seen these.” Diana tapped a point on the board with her wand, and then another, and then yet another and another as if playing the world’s most delicate game of whack-a-mole. At each point of contact, a red circle appeared. “These,” said Diana, still working, “are all of the places where the paper has been edited since the initial prediction.”

She let the statement hang in the air. Once Amanda found her voice, she croaked out, “The hell are you—how can you even—”

“Oh, it’s a simple enough spell to find the age of the ink, and to find the traces of what was removed.” Diana paused in her work for a moment to look at Amanda. “Well, not simple as such, but doable. You’ll note the increased frequency of the edits within the past year,” she continued, “following a date I’m sure you remember.”

Amanda did see that there were a lot more red circles on the rightmost column of the board’s image, but she couldn’t for the life of her figure out what Diana was talking about. She stared blankly.

Diana sighed. “Starfall, Amanda. The day magic exploded back onto the world. Which confirms something I spent a lot of time researching: powerful magic can confound even the best fortune telling—like overwhelming a radio signal with static near power lines.” She stared levelly at Amanda. “Powerful magic… like the shoe you’re wearing.”

Amanda couldn’t think of anything to say, but thankfully she didn’t need to. “What on earth are you talking about, you stupid little girl?” yelled her mother. “What do you know about the deep magic of fortune telling—”

Diana’s wand moved like a striking snake, and Mrs. O’Neill flinched back. “This is what I know about fortune telling,” Diana said. “I know that Amalthea O’Neill wasn’t predicting where Amanda would go, she was finding her. You O’Neills were using your network to find Amanda, or else you wouldn’t have waited so long each time to track her down each time, would you?”

Mrs. O’Neill’s eyes widened. “And,” Diana continued, with a little smirk, “I know that you didn’t know that until I told you, just now. Amalthea O’Neill keeps her tarot cards close to the chest.” She swished her wand, and the board vanished.

“The—the casino!” Amanda held out a shaky hand. “It was called The Music Box, it—the slot machines—” She sounded like a crazy person, she realized, so she settled for saying, “She knew I would be there!”
“Or she found out you were in Las Vegas, and prepared one of your family’s own casinos for you.” Diana let out what could have been a grunt of frustration. “There is no casino in Las Vegas named ‘The Music Box’. It changed back to its original name of O’Neill Island as soon as you were out of the door. Once they found out you were in Las Vegas, they set the bait for you, and waited for you to bite.”

Amanda blinked rapidly. “Then—the, the letters. Where I’m saying something and she knows what I’m gonna say, and it’s written down on the paper, and—” She stopped, because Diana was pulling a piece of paper from her own pocket. “What?”

“I apologize, I must have something in my ear,” Diana said, tapping her wand against the paper. “Could you repeat that?”

Amanda stepped forward, away from the ledge. “I said, she knows what I’m gonna say before I say it! How do you explain that?”

Diana tapped the edge of the paper with her wand, and it floated over to Amanda. “Like this.”

Amanda stared down at the paper. Her own words stared back up at her: *I said, she knows what I’m gonna say before I say it! How do you explain that?* “What—but—I don’t—” As Amanda stuttered, the new words appeared on the page as well.

“It’s not a hard spell, transcribing spoken words onto paper,” Diana said. “Court stenographers use it. You just would need to have it stop recording as soon as you laid eyes on it. Difficult, but not *impossible*.” She groaned. “For heaven’s sake, Amanda! She had Andrew’s plane sabotaged so he couldn’t come back to mess things up once his part was finished! She’s relying on you not looking deeper!”

“So—so what?” Unable to stand looking at her own words anymore, Amanda crumpled up the paper and threw it to the ground. “What? You’re saying she’s a hack? She can’t predict anything, she doesn’t have any power over me?”

“No.” Diana’s voice was grave. “She is the most powerful fortune teller in the world. She’s richer than some countries, and her network of information is *vast*. She can predict the future better than anyone else on Earth, and she can exert a *lot* of power over you. I can’t deny that.” Diana sighed. “She predicted me. She predicted enough to hurt.”

“Then—” Amanda’s words hitched in her throat. The dry air was turning her voice hoarse. “Why would she lie? Why try to trick me?”

Diana looked down at the ground. “When someone wants to make you feel like you’re powerless,” she said, and effort was evident in every word, “or like you don’t matter, then they’ll try to make themselves seem more powerful than they really are. Like you don’t have any choices. It’s how all abusers work.” She looked up, wearing a self-satisfied smile all over her face except for her mouth. “Our families aren’t as different as you thought.”

Wind blew across the rock, kicking up dust. Amanda’s mother looked bug-eyed, with what could have been shock as easily as it could have been barely-suppressed rage. Diana’s expression didn’t change. She knew she’d won.

Finally, Amanda spoke. “So?” she said.
Akko stared up at the rock, snarling. Amanda’s mother had gone up there minutes ago, and she hadn’t heard anything since. “Come… on ….” she said, backing up again inside her cage, and then she ran at the bars and tackled them shoulder-first. It was bruising her, bit by painful bit, but every tackle moved her cage closer to her wand. Soon she’d be able to reach through the bars and grab it.

She’d messed up by being stupid before. Simple and gullible and every stupid thing she’d ever tried to outgrow.

“Come on!” she yelled, tackling the cage again. Budging it another inch. She needed to move faster, the wand was still feet away—

There was a rush of air, and Akko looked up on instinct. Something flew overhead.

Diana blinked, a hint of worry growing on her face. “What do you mean, ‘so’?”

“So what if she’s not perfect at fortune telling?” Amanda said. A cold, clammy feeling was setting in, as if the sun was disappearing behind a cloud. Maybe it was the blood loss, or maybe it was the feeling of disappointment.

“So—” Diana sputtered for a moment. “So that was your main problem, wasn’t it? You thought she could control your life with her predictions, but she can’t! So, your problem is solved! You can come back with me!”

Amanda heaved breaths. She stepped backward.

“Amanda,” Diana said, her voice more strident, “you can come back with me.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Amanda said, her voice hoarse with exertion. “So what, she—she can’t control me in that one way, but she can still control me in all the other ways? Are you stupid?”

“I’m trying— gah!” Diana’s head jerked down and to the side, as if weighted with fury. “I’m trying,” she repeated, pulling her head back up, “to help you.”

“Well, I’m sorry you wasted so much time on me, then.” Amanda raised her wand again. She stepped back, still limping. Her heel was over empty air and, much further down, hard rock. Hard enough, she hoped.

Diana’s wand rose slowly from its position by her leg. “Amanda, don’t make me—”

“You’re like her.” Amanda’s eyes flicked between Diana and Mrs. O’Neill. “You don’t… get it. It’s already over. Even if that prophecy wasn’t real, it came true. I’m already as bad as her, I’m already hurting people, I need to go. I need to get out.”

“You are not—”

Amanda sighed. She looked Diana straight in the eyes. And she really wasn't angry, not anymore. “Sorry you went to all this trouble. Bye.” She pressed the wand into her temple, and said, “Mur…"
Huh. Everything was blurry. That, and the wetness on her cheeks, had to mean she was crying. Maybe her voice hadn’t just been hoarse from the air, after all. She held both hands on her wand to steady it, and then winced as the motion shifted the weight on her bad leg. The air seemed to drag at the open wounds.

Weird. About to die, and she’d never felt more alive.

She didn’t want to.

But.

Amanda sucked in a last breath. This was the only way out. “Murowa—”

Diana ran forward, hand outstretched, her wand falling to the ground. “No —”

A beam of light.

An impact.

…

And Amanda’s wand flew away.

She gasped, taking huge gaping breaths like she was trying to fill her entire body with air. Her wand fell over the edge behind her, and she glanced down to see it fall, and there was a shape rising to meet it. Amanda’s arms pinwheeled as she nearly lost her balance over the edge, and she took a frantic step forward—

And then the shape, the human silhouette, spoke. “Do that again, Amanda, and you’ll be in detention for the rest of the school year.”

“Professor Meridies?” Diana said behind her. Her voice was half as astonished as Amanda felt.

“In the flesh.”

“No,” Amanda said. “In the hologram. You wouldn’t actually care enough to—”

Croix crested the top of the plateau and came into the light. Croix. Not Croix the hologram. Not Croix, the projected image. Croix, in flesh and blood, her cape blocking out the sky behind her instead of letting it through.

Croix Meridies. Here. She stared down at Amanda, her expression unreadable.

Amanda sucked in a breath. “What are you—”

And that was as far as she got before Croix stepped forward, off her disk and onto the plateau, and embraced her.

The cape swept around her. Her head went into Croix’s shoulder. It felt… weirdly warm. Even safe.

“What are you,” Amanda started again. She gulped. “Doing here?”

Croix didn’t respond for a few seconds. When she did, her voice was stilted. “I’m… not qualified for this,” she said. “My people skills are… limited, at best. But, right now, you’re my most important priority, so… I’m here. In the flesh. This is what you get.” She repositioned her arms to
be a little looser around Amanda’s torso. “I thought I would start with a hug. Is that helping at all? I value user input.”

Amanda couldn’t help but laugh, even as she collapsed down to her knees. *Are you for real?* she thought, but found herself unable to say.

“Amanda, speak to me.” Croix squeezed a little tighter again. She didn't seem to be able to make up her mind. “Look. I asked your roommates what was going on. Neither of them is exactly talkative. You need to tell me what's going on.”

Amanda still couldn't find any words.

“OK, fine, force *me* to talk.” Croix drew away, but left her hands on Amanda’s shoulders. “I defused the bomb. Which wasn’t easy, by the way, because Akko Kagari gets her ideas of how to defuse a bomb from some kind of sci fi movie or something, but there it is. You're not technically a terrorist, no one got hurt, and you’re welcome.”

Finally, like bile she couldn't hold back, words dribbled out her mouth. “It doesn't matter.”

“Of course it doesn’t matter.” Croix’s gaze was level. “I know it doesn’t matter. But you still needed to hear that.”

Amanda tried to pull away, but Croix’s grip on her shoulders was stronger and she was feeling very weak. She was even too weak to stop talking once she'd started. “It doesn't matter, okay? It doesn't matter because everything's going according to plan. My stupid evil granny's plan. And any minute now something's gonna happen, some stupid twist of fate, something that's gonna yank me away to the old family house and that'll be it, because she's never been wrong before and today's the day she said I'd come back and, and I've spent my whole life trying to get away and I....”

She slumped forward, head hung low. “I can't do this anymore. All right? I'm not strong enough to do this anymore, and there's no one who can help me because I've been—been treating everyone like *shit*, just like she wants me to. I can't do this anymore, I have to get out, I need to get out....”

She forced herself to look up at Croix as she asked, “Why are you keeping me here?”

Croix Meridies didn't answer for what felt like a whole minute. Her gaze remained steady. Finally, hesitantly, she spoke. “I... I think I understand. I get it.”

“No, you *don't*! You *don't* get it!” That was enough to get Amanda to stand. “No one gets it! Everyone thinks they get it, everyone thinks they know so well, and no one *does*, so don't tell me — *don't tell me*—”

God, she couldn't even see anymore. She could only feel it as Croix moved closer again, and Amanda didn't have the strength to stop this second embrace.

“*I get it*.” Croix’s voice brooked no argument. “I see a lot of myself in you, you know. Feeling like you’ve been screwed over by destiny, by someone else's plan, your whole life. Feeling like you’re too far gone to be any kind of decent human being, like you've pushed away anyone who cares. Feeling like... well, like you are now. Like it has to end, for everyone’s sake. Yeah, I get it.”

Amanda processed that for several seconds too long. She blinked, several times, trying to clean off some of the tears to get a good look. “You?”

Croix looked back, her face serious as an early grave. “Yeah, me.”

It felt a bit like the shifting of continents, in Amanda’s head. Croix, the unflappable evil bitch
queen herself, had thought about—

“Listen,” Croix started, “after the miss—” And then she stopped, and looked up at Mrs. O’Neill, and took her hand off Amanda’s shoulder to bring out her wand. “Paleis Capama.”

The bubble surrounded Mrs. O’Neill, sweeping her up and lifting her from the ground. “What are you doing?” she squawked, as it floated away and over the side. “Let me out of this at….” Her voice faded gradually. Amanda found herself laughing, just for a few seconds, as she watched the spectacle.

“After the missile,” Croix said, her voice low. “Remember how that day went? How everything I’d ever done, everyone I’d ever hurt, turned out to have been for nothing? How I nearly started a war? I wasn’t… feeling my best after Starfall. I… well, the New Moon Tower is pretty tall.” She nodded without apparent intent, looking past Amanda. “I promise you, it looks taller from the roof.”

Amanda stared at her. Then she stared down at the ground below her, and then she looked back up at Croix.

“Obviously, I didn’t. Of course it’s obvious.” Croix rolled her eyes. “You know why?”

“Maybe you should have,” Amanda muttered. She immediately hated saying it, flinched back—throwing away a last chance, how stupid was she, now Croix was going to leave too like she’d pushed away everyone else and—

Croix stared at her, and then said, “Yes, maybe I should have. Maybe I still should. Except that I have a promise to fulfill before I can even let myself think about that. I have more to offer the world alive than dead. So do you, Amanda, once you’ve figured out what that is.”

“I can’t,” Amanda said.

“You really believe that?”

Amanda felt more tears on her cheeks, replacing the ones that had been blotted out against Croix’s shirt. “I don’t—my grandmother, she’s making it so I don’t have any future except the one she chooses. You don’t know what it’s like. But this way, I can at least… make it so she doesn’t get her own way.”

A smirk flashed across Croix’s face, but unusually, it only stayed for a moment. “So you’d devote your life to making sure the old hag’s prediction didn’t turn out like she thought? That’s pretty relatable. But she doesn’t care about you. She won’t be hurt if you do this—you’re just hurting yourself.”

“Maybe I want to.” Oh, Christ, the tears and the sobs were coming hard and fast now, she didn’t want to do this in front of Croix of all freaking people—

Croix pulled her in close again, so that she was crying into Croix’s shirt. “Hey. It’s okay. It’s okay, it’s really okay. You’re a kid. You've got a big life ahead of you. I know this seems like the end of the world, but I promise it’s not.”

A little laugh escaped her. “I mean, stars, look at me. I’m basically a war criminal. But even I couldn't push Chariot—couldn't push everyone away, no matter how hard I tried. And I got a second chance. I got to choose.”

She squeezed a little harder. “But that’s the catch, you know? You get to choose, but you have to choose. You can’t keep doing what you’re doing, just… drifting around, letting other people
choose for you. And you can’t just make your choice whatever you think is gonna be the opposite of someone else’s plan, either, because that’s just like choosing what they want but the other way around. You have to actually choose.” She pulled away from Amanda a little, just enough to show her smile. “But you get to choose.”

She took one hand off Amanda, reached into her pocket, and pulled out Amanda’s wand. She pushed it into Amanda’s hand.

Amanda stared at her, and it felt like the sun was coming out. She got it. She really got it.

“But hey.” Abruptly, Croix stood up. “Don’t take my word for it.” She raised a hand, and one of her droids flew over, and she tapped out something on a holographic keyboard projected from its top. There was a holographic screen, too: Amanda was looking at it from the wrong side, but what she saw looked like two long numbers. “You got that?” Croix asked.

Constanze, who was sitting atop her broom near the top of her secret lab, got that.

The two long numbers from Croix were already feeding into the machine. They were coordinates, longitude and latitude, and of such high precision that you could use them to swat a fly from space.

The transmitting tower shuddered into action. It was as tall as a power transmission tower, but a hundred times more complex in its latticework of struts. If you squinted, they formed a sort of spiral, swirling carefully around a central platter suspended some twenty feet above the ground. On that platter was a message. Just a simple message, and a short one too—neither Constanze nor Jasminka had ever been exactly talkative, after all.

The lights in the room flickered. If Constanze’s back-of-the-envelope calculations had been correct—and yes, they had been, because she’d been the one doing them—the amount of energy required to perform this trick could power several city blocks for a week. You’d need several high-capacity generators to power it… or one determined Jasminka Antonenko.

Constanze waved frantically down at her, and she nodded from atop her exercise bike, and then started pedaling. The pedals weren’t moving quickly, but they didn’t need to: the resistance in the wheel was so high that no one else could have moved it. Within a few seconds, the lights stopped flickering. Within a few seconds after that, they were glowing so brightly that Constanze flipped down her welding mask again.

By degrees, the tower came alive. At first there was only a suggestion of movement near the base, like an ember of green flame. But more and more embers came to life, running higher and higher up the spiraling struts, and wicking toward the center like a DNA helix. Constanze looked up, mouth ajar, as the flickering green reached the top.

Jasminka was pedaling faster and faster. The green got brighter and brighter, and the tower shook as if in an earthquake. Constanze’s eyes widened in a moment of horrid realization—she hadn’t built it sturdy enough, she’d been too hasty—

She dived, hard and fast, and aimed for Jasminka as everything flashed white.
There was a bolt from the blue, so bright that Amanda had to cover her eyes with both arms. And the sound was incredible, like being caught in the origin of a thunderclap.

When the sound had faded (but not the ringing in her ears), and Amanda dared to lower her arms, she saw a couple of things. Firstly, Diana, who was cowering. Secondly, Akko, who was clambering over the edge of the plateau, wand in hand. “What the hell was that?” she mouthed, but whether she was actually talking, Amanda had no idea.

Third was Professor Croix, still smiling away as if she saw this sort of thing every day of the week. Maybe she did. She tilted her head in Amanda’s direction and said, “It’s for you,” and nodded at the fourth and final thing: an envelope. It sat on the ground, surrounded by the charred evidence of a lightning strike. And Croix was right: the word on the front was Amanda.

She walked toward it, hesitantly, and reached out for it—but pulled back. She’d had bad luck with letters meant for her before….

“I promise it’s okay,” Croix said from behind her. Amanda gritted her teeth, and grabbed the envelope, and ripped it open.

And she read it.

And tears filled her eyes.

“Amanda?” said a voice.

She looked up. Mrs. O’Neill was rising up and landing on the plateau, surrounded in a bubble like some perverse corruption of Glinda the Good Witch. She had a replacement magic wand in her hand; perhaps one of the security people had had it for her?

Whatever. It didn’t matter, after all. The letter slipped from her hands and fell to the ground.

Amanda’s mother stared at her. “You are going to go home now, aren’t you?” Her voice wasn’t exactly fake-sweet anymore: it had a more desperate air. “Now that you’re done with that ledge thing?” God, she looked frightened, and Amanda knew exactly who of. It was almost as if Amanda could forgive her.

Amanda flashed a smile at her. “Yeah. I’m going straight home now. Well, except that I don’t have my—”

“Whoa, watch out!”

A streak of red resolved itself into a very little witch, landing hard on the plateau from the side. She had white hair, bleached white, that seemed to have been straightened, and in her hand was—Amanda blinked, but then had to chuckle at the coincidence—the other seven thousand league boot. “Professor Croix!” she said, holding it up. “I got the one boot, but—hey!”

For Amanda had just muttered, “Veni,” and magicked the boot out of the girl’s hand. It flew over to her, landing heel-first on the ground, and Amanda slid her bare foot into it as smoothly as she could manage—which wasn’t very smoothly, what with all the pain in her leg. But it was important to have a bit of style. “All right. Homeward bound,” she said, cracking her knuckles.

A little gasp: Amanda looked over and saw Akko looking horrified, and Diana with her hand over her mouth, as if it hid her matching expression at all. Amanda just smiled at them too. “Hey, don't
worry about it,” she said. “There’s no place like home, right?”

And she closed her eyes, tapped her heels against each other three times, and took three steps.

And she went home.

Amanda was coming home.

Finally. After all this time. Amanda was coming home.

If Amalthea had had enough muscle tone left in her body, she might have quivered with anticipation. All these years of work, of carefully placed statements and carefully instructed servants, were finally paying off. Finally, the O’Neill family would be able to survive with an heir as strong and as capable as herself. She’d been looking forward to this moment for a long time—and in a more literal sense than most.

She gazed out upon her domain—right now, only a bedroom. But the vision of her prophecy was overlaid atop the real one, producing a hyper-real effect. It was a view she cherished, a view she worked for, making sure everything lined up just right.

Oh, there had been some worrisome moments there. The whole business with Starfall, now that had thrown off some of her predictions. And the boots, those had certainly been unexpected. But the strength and breadth of the O’Neill network had put her in good standing to guide events back to where they belonged, with all the outlines matching up. And now, now that the prophecy was coming true, the satisfaction was nearly enough to make her squirm—except that she couldn’t squirm. Nevertheless: there was nothing like a prophecy coming true. Nothing like the confirmation of her power.

It was coming. Three. Two. One….

The door opened. It was almost inaudible, barely a creak, but it was loud enough. Smiling very slightly, and closing her eyes with contentment, Amalthea made the little subvocalizations that were all she was capable of, and the hidden speakers spoke. “Hello again, Amanda. Aren’t you delighted to finally come home, after all this time. Now we can truly begin your education as my heir.” There was a slight reverberation, as her words overlaid with the vision’s.

A pause. A weighty, pregnant pause, long enough that it seemed as though the future was holding its breath—

“Er… actually, it’s me. Mr. O’Neill. I was just wondering, is my daughter here yet? She should be back by now, right?”

Amalthea’s eyes snapped open. Amanda was there. She was standing right in front of Amalthea’s bed, the last vestiges of her pride fleeing her face, ready to accept the fate of being ground down and built back up as her best self—but that was only in the vision. In the real world, it was Amanda’s blasted father, only just peeking through the doorway.

Or no, was the prophecy of Amanda’s father, and Amanda was the real one? No, that was absurd, why would she predict him popping up out of the blue when Amanda was expected?
But why would she be wrong? Now, of all times, when it mattered most, why would she be wrong? “Not possible,” she muttered to herself, or tried to—but the speakers caught it and relayed the words loud and clear.

“Um. What’s not possible?” said Mr. O’Neill.

“I’m sorry,” said the Amanda of the vision, woodenly. “I was being... childish. I’m ready for whatever you’ve got planned for me.”

Amalthea’s eyes flickered from side to side. Her own voice rung out, “Aren’t we both delighted to hear that. You’ll leave now and start right away.” But the Amalthea of this timeline wasn’t the one saying it.

“Are you all right?” Mr. O’Neill said.

“Out,” Amalthea said.

“What?”

“Get out!”

He vanished, eyes almost bugging out of his head as it ducked back behind the closing door. In her vision, Amanda turned around and started walking away.

“Amanda,” Amalthea said, her voice rising. “Where are you? Amanda? Answer me!”

But Amanda just walked out the door, and it closed shut. And Amalthea was alone.

She landed back at Luna Nova, stumbled as her shoes hit the floor, and caught herself against the door. Her door. The door to the dorm room that had, for long enough now, been her real home.

Amanda’s hand shook a little as she grasped for the handle, and she growled as she forced herself to grab hold. If she couldn’t open this door, then what the hell was wrong with her? She shoved it open with her shoulder.

The room was empty, but Constanze’s mattress was hanging ajar over her bedframe, so it was pretty clear where everyone was. Amanda sighed, staggered over to the open hole, and slid down the slide below. There was a cart waiting for her, as always.

And at the end of the cart ride, chaos was waiting for her.

It looked like a skyscraper had come crashing down. Twisted metal struts filled the lab, which looked a hell of a lot bigger than it usually did, actually. Amanda’s breath caught, and she ran forward—limped forward, as pain twisted up her leg. “Jaz!” she yelled. “Cons!”

In front of the wreckage, under an errant I-beam, a lump of something stirred. After a moment, the lump was revealed as Jasminika when she turned her face up at the sound of her name. Her face was covered in soot, and her eyes were wide.

As if she’d suddenly been powered on, Jasminika shoved the I-beam aside as if it were made of cardboard, and got to her feet to reveal Constanze hiding beneath her. She got up as well, and the
two of them stared at Amanda.

Amanda lurched forward, letting an easy smile come to her face—although letting that happen was anything but easy. “Hey, girls.” She winced. Her head was… not quite right. Kinda fuzzy.

The two of them just stood there, staring.

“I, uh. I got your message.” Amanda let her arms rise from her sides a bit, then fall back. “It was… it was nice.” She winced again. *It was nice?* God, sometimes she wanted to haul back and punch herself—

And then Constanze ran up, hauled back, and decked her in the gut.

It wasn’t that painful, physically at least, but Amanda still doubled over. And then Constanze grabbed her as tightly as she could, in a painful hug. And then, muffled by Amanda’s clothes, there was a whisper, a sobbing whisper of a voice.

“Never… do that… again.”

The words were quiet. The mouth that made them didn’t produce that many, after all.

“I won’t,” Amanda mumbled. “I’m sorry. I’m really sorry, girls. I ran away and I got you all worried, and….” She trailed off, because talking was kinda tough right now. “And….”

Jasminka walked up, and grabbed Amanda and Constanze both in a tight hug. “Thanks for coming back,” she said.

“Yeah, no problem. Sorry. I….” As Jasminka released her from the hug, and Amanda was able to breathe in again, she felt herself staggering back. “Whoa. Is there a chair in here, or….” She misstepped backward and landed on her rear. “Okay,” she breathed, “maybe I’ll just sit here….”

She looked at Jaz and Cons, and they both looked down at her leg, and she followed their gaze. Blood was still oozing out of all the tears in her flesh. Well, not oozing. Oozing meant *slowly*.

“Or maybe I’ll just take a lie down,” Amanda said, and felt her head lolling back as everything went white.
They all stared at the empty spot where Amanda had been. Then Akko walked forward, as if asleep. She picked up the letter that had been left, and read it.

*It’s up to you.*

*Love,*

*C&J*

A smile crept onto her face.

“So….” Diana’s voice came from behind her. “Is she all right?”

Akko looked back at her. “Yeah. I think so.”

And then there was laughter.

Like, maniacal laughter. Loud, echoing, supervillain laughter. So, of course, Akko and Diana looked over at Croix, who was doubled over on her knees, shaking with exertion. It seemed to be taking a lot out of her: after about ten seconds of it, she was about half-and-half between laughter and long, loud gasps for breath. After another ten, she was fully into panting mode. Akko felt her hand going instinctively for her wand, just in case; she consciously closed it over thin air instead and asked, “Are you… dying, or something?”

She didn’t answer for a few more seconds, except to hold up an index finger. Finally, she spoke. “I’m not sure!” It was hard to understand what she was actually saying, given the breaths being heaved through each word, but that was Akko’s best guess. Croix flapped a hand at another nearby droid and gasped, “Diagnostic!”


“I don’t know why I asked,” Croix hyperventilated. She tried to get herself to her feet, but didn’t seem to have the knack.

Akko stuck out an arm. “Professor Croix?” she said.

Croix looked at it, for a moment, like it was a revved-up chainsaw. But then she took it, and let Akko pull her up. The hyperventilation was staying around. “That was awful,” she said. “How do you do this caring stuff all the time? It’s a waking nightmare.”

Akko frowned, and then decided to ignore that last part. “Thanks.” She made sure Croix was firmly on her feet before letting go. “For not making me regret trusting you.”

“Any time,” Croix managed.

“I mean, last year, with the….” Akko glanced at Mrs. O’Neill, and decided on, “with the… stuff, it really blew up in my face. And I was worried it would blow up in my face again, with those
bombs. But… it didn’t! So, thank you.”

“Yeah.” Croix flashed a nervous smile. “It definitely did not blow up.”

A little beep sounded out. The droid that had scanned Croix spoke again: “Text message from: Teacher’s Assistant Constanze Amalie von Braunschbank Albrechtsberger.” It took a while to synthesize all the syllables. “Amanda is home safe. Bringing her to hospital wing to deal with leg. Thank you.”

“Oh, well that’s just perfect!”

All eyes turned to Mrs. O’Neill. It seemed like she’d had just a hint of hope left on her face, and like that bit of hope had been picked up and chucked out the window with the incoming message. Now all she had to display was a mess of rage. “You children had one simple job to do,” she yelled, shaking a finger at Akko and Diana, “and you couldn’t even get that right! And you!” Her quivering finger moved to point at Professor Croix, with a little jingle of her earrings to accompany the movement. “Who asked you to get involved at all in our family affair! You should be in prison! And you!”

She pointed at the other arrival, Tiffany, who’d arrived right at the very end and Akko didn’t really know what she was doing here at all, honestly, but Akko gave her a friendly wave nevertheless. She seemed to be trying to hide behind some cover, but there was no cover to hide behind. “I don’t know who you are,” Mrs. O’Neill said, “but I’m sure you made everything worse!”

Akko grinned nervously. Beside her, Diana crossed her arms and bent her lips into the slightest hint of a deniable smirk. “It was your choice to recruit us for your family affair. If it’s gone wrong, then I can only say that you have been hoist with your own petard.”

“Stop with the explosion metaphors,” Croix said out of the side of her mouth. Akko glanced over and saw, with surprise, that she had a nervous smile to match Akko’s own.

“Are you kidding me! A bunch of people could have gotten hurt!”

“Nnnnnno, they couldn’t have. Not enough explosives. And the way fracking works, it wasn’t going to cause some sort of underground fire either.” Croix shrugged. “But you seemed so earnest that I didn’t want to mention it. Look, it’s a fracking tower. No one’s gonna miss it.”

“I don’t care what kind of tower it fracking is!”

But as angry as Akko felt, Mrs. O’Neill looked ten times more incandescent with fury. “You hag!” she screeched, running up toward Croix and quivering like enraged jello. “I will have you thrown
in jail for so long your corpse won’t be released!"

And even as Akko seethed, she had to admit it was pretty funny. As uncomfortable as Croix had looked just a moment before, as Akko and Diana spoke to her, she suddenly seemed… calm. Even amused. “What a fascinating utterance. Yes, I suppose you could do that.” She turned toward Mrs. O’Neill and smiled. “And then they could try to figure out where the bombs had come from, and then I and the school I represent could vouch that an O’Neill planted the bombs in the first place, and that my only involvement was a heroic but failed attempt to undo the damage.”

Croix was a little taller than Mrs. O’Neill, but she didn’t seem content to settle for that: as she walked forward, a droid positioned itself under her feet, letting her rise up even higher above the now-paling woman. “And then,” Croix said, leaning down over her, “all sorts of interesting stories could be told about what kind of household the O’Neills are running, to produce someone troubled enough to bomb her own family’s investments. Stories like what she and her friends have told me, and which I’d be happy to tell the press—or which my computer network would be happy to tell the press instead, if I were somehow incapacitated.” She winked.

The fear was in Mrs. O’Neill’s eyes now. And as much as Akko didn’t like watching Croix do villainy stuff… oh, god, this was like chocolate. This was like eating a huge chocolate dessert, and you knew it was bad for you and you kept digging in anyway.

“Oh…” Professor Croix’s droid sank back down to the ground, and Croix placed a friendly hand on Mrs. O’Neill’s shoulder. “We could just leave the past in the past. And move on to a bright new future!” she said, sweeping her other arm across the horizon. “And it is a new future, I think you’ll find. My favorite kind.”

It was like watching volcanic rock cool. Mrs. O’Neill’s features, eventually, recomposed themselves, but the molten rage was still clear beneath the surface. “You’d better…” She shook a finger at Croix, lamely. “You’d better watch yourself, you… you witch!” And then she turned around—possibly so no one could see her embarrassment at having used witch as an insult—waved her wand, and floated down off the plateau.

“Well.” Croix cracked her knuckles. “Mission complete. I’m sure the Headmistress will be thrilled. Tiffany,” she said, turning to the small girl trying to make herself look even smaller, “you should really be heading back to class now. I’m sure you’ve got plenty of coursework to do.”

Tiff nodded, but didn’t seem too happy about it. “But I didn’t even help anyone,” Akko heard her mumble, before she mounted the Shooting Star and turned into a red blur, then vanished.

“And…” Some of Croix’s awkwardness returned. She flapped a hand at Akko and Diana. “You two should. Also. Do that. Maybe visit Amanda or something. You’re friends, right?”

Diana seemed glum at those words, for a moment; then she looked up, as if something had occurred to her. “Will you be returning with us, Professor?”

“Well, my droids can follow you if you really want—”

“Will you be returning, I mean?” Her gaze bored into Professor Croix. “It’s such a short trip to the leyline from here, and then to Luna Nova… I’m certain Professor Chariot would be very happy to see you.”

Croix smiled at that. Akko would have been surprised if she hadn’t. But then the smile died away. “I can’t,” she said. “I promised I wouldn’t return to Luna Nova before finding the cure for Wagandea’s curse, and now that this Amanda thing is done, I need to get back to that. I think it’s
what being a grown-up, responsible adult authority figure is about.”

Which was laying it on a little thick, Akko thought. But Diana seemed satisfied. “Then I’ll see you later,” she said, and nodded. “Professor Croix.”

Diana turned around and mounted her broom. As soon as her calm face was out of sight from anyone but Akko, it crumpled. “I feel horrendous,” she whispered, as Akko mounted her own broom beside Diana’s. “I was so ready to try to help Amanda, and I’d gathered up all those facts, and I didn’t help her at all. If Professor Croix hadn’t been there….”

Akko felt the mental image of such an event trying to push its way into her mind. She shook her head to banish the intruder, like a dog cleaning itself. “Hey,” she said, holding out her hand. “It’s not like I did any better.” And that was a thought that stank like a garbage dump: she could never let herself be so stupid again. But that wasn’t the important thing right now. “And listen,” she went on, “if you hadn’t been talking to her, Professor Croix wouldn’t have had time to get there. I think you did okay.”

Diana sucked in a breath through her teeth, but forced a smile on the exhale. “I… suppose so.”

For just a moment, she took Akko’s hand. Then the two of them said, in chorus, “Tia freyre!”, and their brooms lifted from the ground.

“Shall we?” Diana said.

“Sure.” And they kicked off in the direction of the leyline.

A few minutes later, Akko frowned. “I feel like we forgot something.” She scrunched up her face, and scrunched up her face some more, and then relaxed and shrugged. “Eh, probably nothing?”

They were almost to the leyline when she yelled, “Andrew!”

“I’m quite all right, thank you,” Andrew said, leaning against the rock in as formal a fashion as he could muster—usually a simple thing to pull off, but rather more difficult this time. A few feet down the rock, Louis and Frank didn’t seem so interested in propriety; they both sat and slouched.

Akko, who’d flown back at incredible speed, looked down at the burly man sprawled on the ground at Andrew’s feet. The man had been looming over him before, but fortunes had changed rather quickly. “What did you do?” she asked. Beside her, Diana gave the man an unsympathetic once-over, and didn’t seem too concerned by whatever injuries she may have found.

Andrew shrugged. “I’m sure he must have tripped and struck his head.” Beneath him, the burly man groaned. The other one next to him was unconscious, and the other one next to him was still a confused squirrel. As for Mrs. O’Neill, she didn’t seem to have the courage left to demand that Andrew fly her out; she was walking in the direction of the destroyed tower and civilization beyond, and had conjured up a parasol to protect herself against the sun.

Akko tapped her nose. “Okay, if you say so. You need a ride, or… are you good, because, y’know, the plane?” She waved in the general direction thereof.

“Oh, we’ll be fine.” He smiled up at her, and at Diana flying beside her. “Heavens know when
we’ll meet next, so… take care, won’t you both?”

“Sure thing! Bye, Andrew!” Akko waved enthusiastically as she swung her broom around and made for the leyline; Diana merely inclined her head before following.

And then, once he was sure they were out of sight, Andrew got back to brooding.

“Are they gone?” Louis said, sounding shaken.

Croix had appeared. The famous technomagical prodigy, Professor Croix, had been talking up on the plateau. And before she’d really started talking, she had banished Mrs. O’Neill from hearing range.

“Yeah, Louis,” Frank said, “they’re gone.”

And Andrew had listened. The plateau was high enough that he hadn’t been able to catch more than the random phrase, or errant word, but he’d listened nonetheless.

“Including Amanda?” Louis asked.

And he had caught the odd word. Words like, for instance, bomb. And war criminal. And Starfall.

“Yeah,” Frank said. “I’m pretty sure she left first, her and her magic boots. Your nads are safe.”

And, this was the big one, missile. Like, just possibly, the missile on Starfall that his father had ordered Andrew to investigate.

“But I never got to tell her how I feel,” Louis sobbed, and buried his face in Frank’s jacket.

Frank blinked for a few seconds, and then said, kindly, “How about we get you on the jet?”

It was only a hunch, Andrew reminded himself, as he followed his cohorts to the jet. Nothing that anyone would be interested in now, at least on its own. But… at the very least… it merited some more investigation.

Croix flew like hell.

She was leaning so far forward on her droid that she was nearly horizontal, and the speed was the only thing keeping her mounted. She and her robotic fleet flew above the Indian forest, making a beeline from the nearest leyline to the library. If she hustled, if she really sprinted for it—

The droid dropped her off a dozen yards from the foothill with the library, and she ran as hard as she could. The lost library, the one which might hold the secrets to Wagandea’s curse, was right there.

Behind a hundred tons of rubble.

As she got close enough to see it, Croix slowed to a standstill. The entrance to the library had caved in. And if she was right, that must have meant the rest of the library had caved in as well, and destroyed the priceless knowledge inside. She was too late.
A laugh escaped her, like the first trickle of water from a dam. Before long she was on her knees in hysteric, literally pounding at the ground with a fist. Tears streamed down her face for the second time that day.

Once she’d gotten enough breath back to speak, a minute later, she only had one thing to say: “Being good sucks.”

When Amanda woke up, she was in a bed, and it wasn’t the one in her dorm room.

Her eyes went wide for a moment, and she struggled against the sheets, before she realized—this was just the hospital wing at Luna Nova. And, once she relaxed, she noticed she wasn’t alone. “Hey, girls,” she said, smiling.

There was Jaz, smiling at her and happily munching on apple after apple. There was Cons, sprawled over the bed and halfway onto Amanda’s good leg, fast asleep and snoring loudly (for someone so quiet she had a snore like a foghorn). There was Akko, looking so overjoyed that she might cry. And there was Diana… handing her a newspaper, for some reason. “Seriously?” Amanda said, but she took it regardless. “An actual printed newspaper? God, you’re so old timey.”

Diana rolled her eyes, still smiling. “Glad you’re awake. Just read it.”

Amanda didn’t read it, not really. But she did skim. O’NEILL HEIRESS FOUND: FAMILY RELIEVED. And there was some bullcrap in there about how delighted her family was to finally have located her, and about how the poor girl in question couldn’t possibly be reached for comment since she was so shaken from the ordeal, and a little summary about the O’Neill fortune telling matriarch. And above all, a gaping lack of anything about years of abuse, or running away from home, or how the great fortune teller had been proven dead wrong.

“They’re covering it up,” Diana said, smiling a little. “Heaven forfend your family should ever have the slightest bit of bad press. And now you have something to hold over them, just in case.”

Amanda snorted. All right, maybe Diana did get it sometimes. Just a bit.

As soon as Diana took the newspaper back, Akko leaned in for a quick and painful hug—mostly painful because she managed to lean into Amanda’s bad leg in the process. “Ow!” Amanda shoved her away. “Jeez, have mercy on a poor sap, would ya?”

“Sorry!” Akko leaned in again, and did a more careful job this time, and Amanda reciprocated the hug in full.

“So…” Amanda looked down at her body, currently covered by sheets. In particular, she glanced down at her concealed left leg. “How bad’s the damage?”

Akko and Diana both winced a bit. Not Jasminka, though. She gulped down her latest apple and said, “The nurse didn’t show us.”

So Amanda frowned, and lifted up her sheets—enough for her to see what was under there, but no one else. She’d been dressed in a hospital gown, so she pulled that aside as well, and saw a swath of bandages all up and down her left leg. She didn’t feel up to taking those off, but when she ran her hand up and down the leg, she felt the damage beneath it.
She stared at it for a few seconds more, and then let her sheet drop back down. When she looked up, everyone who was awake was watching her with apparently bated breath. So she cracked a grin and said, “I am gonna have some badass scars.”

Jasminka smiled weakly, and Diana cringed. And Akko jumped for joy. “I’m so glad you’re okay! And now I have to go right now immediately,” she said, and started backing up.

“Akko!” Diana hissed.

“What? We have MOP stuff to do!” Akko backed up almost all the way to the door, but she finally turned around and started hurrying properly. “Those witches aren’t gonna teach themselves, and it’s a big timesink, so… bye!” She ran out the door.

A few seconds later, she poked her head back in. “And you still need those new shoes!” she yelled, before ducking out again.

Amanda snorted deep in her throat. Diana settled for a little posh sigh. “I suppose she is right. Not just about the shoes, I mean—we do have a responsibility, after all.” She nodded a farewell to Amanda. “Good to have you back.” Then she turned to leave, following Akko through the door. Amanda watched her as she left, and then watched the empty doorway for some time after.

So it was just Amanda, Jaz, and Cons. And Cons seemed to be stirring. “Hey, Cons,” Amanda said, as two bleary eyes opened. “Go back to sleep, okay? I’m doing fine.”

Constanze raised a tired thumbs-up before doing just that. Jasminka smiled down at her, then passed Amanda an apple, which she gratefully accepted. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

Amanda shrugged. But her gaze returned to the empty doorway where Akko and Diana had left through. **We do have a responsibility.**

Jasminka paused, holding an apple near her mouth. **“Something on your mind?”**

*That’s the catch, you know? You get to choose… but you have to choose.*

“Just thinking,” Amanda said, and took a bite of the apple.

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Tiffany trudged up the steps to her dorm room, and each leg felt as heavy as a ton of bricks.

It had been two days. Two days since her final attempt to get back Scarlette’s boots had ended in abject failure. Two days since Scarlette had started, once again, secluding herself in Tiff’s room and refusing to fly. Two days of feeling, very accurately, like a loser.

Tiff kicked at imaginary pieces of dirt on the way up, absentmindedly tugging at her hair with one hand. Now she had no idea where Amanda was, and no time to look for her since she was only just now finishing up her coursework backlog, and it felt like she’d never see those boots again—

“Hey, you’re Tiffany, aren’t you?”

As Tiff turned the corner out of the staircase, the voice caught her off-guard, and she looked up. And there was Amanda O’Neill, leaned against a wall, arms crossed behind her head. An easy smile painted her face, and she looked at Tiff with just the right amount of confidence, and *gosh*
she was cool. Tiff felt her heart beat a little faster. “Y-yes?” she stuttered. “I mean. Yes. That is I.”

“Yeah, thought so.” Amanda idly crossed her legs. “Croix said you were the one who barreled into me and grabbed my boot.”

Tiff cringed, her gaze dropping to the floor. “I’m really sorry. I wasn’t trying to—”

“Nah, what? I was gonna say thank you.”

Tiff’s eyes went wide, and she looked back up

“Yeah, if you hadn’t done that, I probably wouldn’t have gotten some really good advice, and then who knows what could have happened. So, yeah. Thanks.” Amanda snorted, and crossed her legs the other way.

The motion grabbed Tiff’s eye. The reason for this was because there was something red and raw and peculiar, all over Amanda’s leg from the bottom of her skirt all the way down to her brand new shoes. It took a moment for her to realize what all the red raw skin was.

It took another moment for her to realize she was staring at another witch’s leg. And then, oh gosh no, Amanda seemed to catch her staring. “Like what you see?” she said, shaking the heavily scarred leg. It looked as if a special effects artist, enthusiastic but amateurish, had used it as a canvas.

Tiff bit her lip, feeling a blush burning her cheeks. “No.” Which was the truth, she was pretty sure. “Isn’t that painful?”

“Nah, not really. Just gonna make it harder to run.” With nary a wince, Amanda pushed herself off the wall and stood up straight. “Oh, yeah, about thanking you. Professor Croix said you were looking for these. Catch.” And she pulled her hands from behind her head, holding the red boots in them, and tossed the boots to Tiff.

Tiff was so gobsmacked that she almost didn’t catch them in time, and had to fumble for several seconds before she had a proper hold.

“Croix said to tell you, try not to get into trouble with ‘em.” Amanda barked a laugh. “Like I’m anyone to talk.”

“Oh my goodness,” Tiff said, staring at them. If someone had taken a picture of her right then, Tiff was sure she’d have been able to see the stars in her eyes. “Oh my actual goodness! Thank you so—wait, really?” The stars in her eyes winked out, and she gave Amanda a questioning look. “You’re just giving these up because Professor Croix told you to?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Amanda shrugged, a little smile on her face.

“But—but you could go anywhere you want!”


“I—yes, I want them! Thank you so much!”

“There ya go.” Amanda turned to leave, but then paused before walking away. “Also, before I forget. You’re pretty tight with Akko now, right? If you see her before I do, can you tell her I wanna talk to her? About joining the MOP?”
Tiff blinked at that. “You? Really?”

“Yeah, sure!” Amanda waved a hand casually, and started walking away. “Gotta stop wasting my life sometime, right? Anyway, thanks again! Catch ya later!”

And she was gone.

Tiff stood there for a moment, clutching the boots to her chest. Both boots, here and now. “I helped someone,” she whispered, voice quivering. She sniffed and shook from side to side, eyes squeezed shut and wearing a smile so wide it hurt. “I actually helped someone.”

She shivered. Then she looked up at the next flight of stairs she had to climb, and a furtive smile came to her lips.

Tiff bent down and pulled off her shoes, glancing around to see no one was watching, and quickly replaced them with the seven thousand league boots. She was pretty sure that she and Amanda O’Neill had different shoe sizes: even so, the shoes fit perfectly, like a glove for her feet. Then she tapped her heels together three times as Amanda had done. “There’s… no place like home?”

She walked forward three steps, and—

“Jesus!” Char yelled, as Tiff found herself in her dorm room, her hair blowing back. To her other side, Mani yelped something in Arabic, fell off her bed, and blasted a beam of light from her wand into a wall, where it exploded slightly.

“Da da-da-da-daaaaaaaaa! I got the boots!” Tiff yelled, pulling them off and holding them high.

“Cool!” Char said, eyes wide as she backed up against the wall on her bottom bunk. “Now never do that again!”

“Okay, sheesh.” Tiff grimaced. She turned around, looking for the Shooting Star, and found it in the corner by the door. “Scarlette?” she said. “Can you hear me?”

The broom didn’t so much as twitch.

“I got one of your missing pieces back,” she said, and held out the boots. And then, when no reaction was forthcoming, she held them a little closer, and a little closer still—

The Star burst to life. It blasted off the ground and flew figure-eights around Tiff, blurring into a continuous loop of red. Besides the noise of air being shredded around her, Tiff heard a whisper in her ears, getting louder and louder: “You did it you did it you did it YOU DID IT—”

“Yes, yes, all right, I did it!” Tiff wanted to back away nervously, but that seemed like a way to get tackled by an overjoyed broomstick right now, so she held up her hands in a halfway-to-surrender gesture. “I think! But I don’t know how to put you back together!”

The Star froze in front of her. Scarlette appeared in phantom form beside it, her red outlines flickering. “Oh,” she said.

“It is so weird when you talk to her,” Char muttered to the side. “Like when someone’s on the phone.”

Tiff ignored this. “Maybe if I just….” She held out the boots, and smushed them against the broomstick. For a moment, she wasn’t sure what she was expecting, but then both the broom and the boots glowed bright red, and she felt less resistance. She pushed them further forward, and
watched as the boots pushed their way inside the broomstick, disappearing as if being shoved through a crack under a door.

And when she’d pushed them all the way in, there was a flash of bright red light, and—

There had been three. But now, the number had increased to nine.

It wasn’t near enough.

She swallowed down a groan, and ran her wand across the patient’s forehead. He trembled, and his skin was slick with sweat here in the cool, dark room. Her day had been so long already; it took all her effort not to lie down on the bed beside him. “A simple curse,” she said at last, and turned to face the patient’s wife. “But still quite dangerous. Please stand back. I’ll try to break it now, but there is always just a chance of repercussions.”

She dutifully did so. “Oh, Geoffroi,” she murmured, sitting down against the wall, head in her hands.

The name, Scarlette was sure, would glide straight through her mind without a chance of taking root. The other names of this damned town had not fared any better in her head. “Away, foul malediction, from this mind; I cast you out at once, get thee behind.” She murmured, making as close to no sound as she could. It would not do to let a peasant hear a witch’s spell; imagine surgeons giving up their knives to patients, letting them do as they pleased? No, this was her task alone. “Daemonium eiceret!” she hissed.

A ray of light, like sunlight through the clouds, burst from her wandtip toward the patient’s skin. He trembled, then convulsed, then thrashed about, as lines of crimson magic ringed his head, constricting it as if she meant to crush it. But what she meant to crush did soon appear; a sickly green and panicked-looking skull, which showed up on his face as if it were a sudden rash. It looked from side to side, pain clear upon its absent face, then zoomed toward the patient’s neck.

A flick of Scarlette’s wrist, and yet another group of rings appeared around his neck, and squeezed that tight as well. The malady was cut off, and it shrieked in silence, trembling as the pressure grew, and grew, and still it grew—

The skull burst out the top of the man’s head, ejected by the pressure like a cork off of a potion. Scarlette released the magic from the patient, and he gasped for breath. The skull’s eyes looked from side to side, and then it shrieked (now audible) and flew toward the patient’s wife. She shrieked, quite like the skull, and cowered—

“Murowa maxima!”

She didn’t hesitate, but didn’t rush. Her spell flew true, connected with the skull, and blasted it to nothing. Scarlette allowed herself the slightest smile.

The patient’s breaths slowed down, and he was still.

The wife stood up and let her hands fall from her face. She took a step, and then ran to her husband. “Geoffroi!” she sobbed. “Geoffroi!”
“He’ll be all right,” said Scarlette, and she patted the wife’s shoulder, just as lightly as she could. “Your husband will be fine.”

“Thank you,” sobbed the wife. “How can I repay you?”

“Please, don’t speak of repayment,” said Scarlette. She smiled, brightly now, and turned to leave. “This is a witch’s duty, nothing more.”

Her hand was on the door when the wife said, “And what if it comes back? What shall I do if he falls ill again?”

Scarlette’s hand gripped the doorknob very tightly. “Well,” she said, “you’d best call me again.”

“But what if you are busy?” the woman went on. Scarlette kicked hastily at her heel, as the woman stood and lurched her way. “Can’t you tell me how to save my husband?”

“I really need to go,” Scarlette said, opening the door. She took three hasty steps, the wife still wailing behind her, and vanished.

When she reappeared, it was within another hut—a better one, a witch’s hut in fact. She had a shelf of potions, and a shelf of books, and several shelves full of ingredients (and every shelf was red, and so was every wall in varying shades). But right now, in Scarlette’s eyes, the greatest healing power of them all was in the center of the room: a giant comfy bed and its red blankets. She sank into it face-first, kicking off her boots as she did so.

She would have lain there until Kingdom Come, she thought, except her door just had to open then and there. “Scarlette!” sang Woodward’s voice, as bright as ever. “The plants heard you return, and—”

Scarlette groaned.

“Ooh. Busy day?”

“Woody,” Scarlette said, “get out and let me rest in peace.”

“That bad, huh?”

Scarlette didn’t talk again for several minutes. At least that’s how it felt. At length, she could hear Woodward walking in and sitting down upon her only chair; Scarlette had never liked to entertain. “Are you okay?” Woodward said.

“I created boots to move me faster than the fastest broom on Earth.” Her voice was muffled by the comforter. “How in starlight’s name can it still not be fast enough?”

“The world is really big,” said Woodward, and Scarlette felt a gentle hand upon her back. “You’re doing all you can and that is wonderful, but please, Scarlette, don’t spread yourself too thin.”

“A witch’s duty is to save the world,” Scarlette muttered. “And everyone who lives within the world. From whoever or whatever may harm them. And you think that I should… slow down?” She raised her head to look at Woodward. God, the witch had grown a lot within the three years that they’d known each other, and the mess of plant life living in her hair had grown much more. A simple weeding spell would likely leave her bald.

“Well,” Woodward said. A smile graced her face. “The reason that I came in here is actually related to that. We’re having a coven outside, and in fact we were waiting for you so that we could
Scarlette grumbled, but shoved herself to her feet. After pushing her feet back into her boots, she took a breath, composed herself, and then walked through her door, behind Woodward.

The homes of the *Luna Nova* Society (not New Moon; consensus had won out upon that point, and Woodward had at least accepted defeat) greeted her. There were nine of them by now: six other witches had each followed after Scarlette, and each one had proved her worth. Each one had earned the right to build her home around a circle with a triskelion symbol at the center. Each one had joined the sisterhood of Beatrix and Woodward—and Scarlette, she thought happily—and she’d gladly share the secrets of her art with any one of them.

The others waved, or nodded, or just smiled as she approached the circle of nine stones that ringed around the triskelion. As she took her seat, Beatrix stood up. Her hair had grown these past three years; once shoulder length, it now flowed to her waist. “I call this meeting of the *Luna Nova* Society to order,” she said. “To recapitulate, you know that we have all worked hard to study magic. And we have all worked even harder, to take that knowledge and use it to do good around the world. So when I say what I am going to say, please understand that it is not meant as an insult.”

She took a breath. “We are not doing enough. *We cannot* do enough. We are all great, but we are only human, and we are only nine strong. And that is why we are all here today.” She nodded across the circle. “Scholastica, please submit your proposal.”

Scholastica wasn’t bookish: bookish was *Scholastica*. She looked like a Greek goddess of studiousness, the template for all book-lovers everywhere. She adjusted her glasses and trembled in her plain clothes, but Woodward—sitting by her side—nudged her forward. “Come on,” she whispered, “it’s a great idea!”

At length, she finally stood, and raised her voice. “Well…” said Scholastica, “I thought that… since we’ve gathered all this knowledge… here at the society… we could… um….” She trailed off.

Lucretia, at her other side, just chuckled. She had a bowl of potions on her lap, each potion labeled and color-coded by its effects; blue for wean, red for woe. They were all labeled in red. “I told you she wouldn’t be able to do it, Woody.”

“Luki, be nice!” Woodward admonished.

Lucretia smiled up at Scholastica, earnestly despite the humor. “Go on, Schola. Tell them your idea.”

“Well…” She adjusted her glasses again. “I think that we should start a school. A school for anyone who wants to be a witch. Then we can teach those witches what we know, and they can go and do good in the world. And then there won’t be only nine of us… there will be hundreds. There will be thousands!” Her eyes shone bright.

A coldness grew inside the stomach of Scarlette.

For a few seconds there was quiet in the circle. Then Han Lanying, a witch from the other side of the world, spoke up. “And how would that differ from what we have now?” she said. Her voice was halting, unaccustomed to the language. “Do not we already—”

“Do we not already,” said Groa sitting next to her, smiling behind her messy dreadlocks.
“Do we not already take in witches, and teach them, and send them out into the world?” Han Lanying said. Her gaze bored into Scholastica, and Scholastica made a sound like a small sheep and sat down.

Woodward stood up in her stead. “Right now, we only take in very very few witches,” she said, striding into the center of the circle. “We don’t allow in anyone who wants to be a witch. What Scholastica is saying, and what I agree with, is that we should start bringing less exceptional witches—even novices—and teach them what we know. And that way—”

“Have you lost your senses?”

Scarlette stood up without thinking about it. All eyes went to her. Woodward frowned. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Woodward.” Scarlette held out her hands, and walked forward. “I trust you with my life. And that is why—the only reason why, you understand—I teach you what I know. These aren’t some silly entertainer’s tricks!” she called out, looking round the circle. Counting up who seemed to be intrigued by this insane idea of a school. “This magic that we know can heal, yes, but in the hands of someone less than skilled, can you imagine what the damage could be?”

Han Lanying, no—Atikah, no—Lucretia, yes. “Scarlette,” said Woodward, smiling to placate, “you’ve told me time and time again that you have too much work to do. The common people whom you help—what if you taught them how to help themselves?”

Groa, yes—Tlahuelpuchi, no—Scholastica and Woodward, obviously yes—Scarlette herself, obviously no. “The final person whom I helped today,” said Scarlette, glowering in Woodward’s face, “was suffering under a terrible curse. Someone must have placed it upon him; what if we teach that person better magic? And another thing—the spell I used to cure him takes control. If I had done it wrong, he could have died. His brains crushed by the magic meant to save him. And you would have me place this spell in unsafe hands? I can’t agree to this, Woody.”

Woodward frowned but stood firm. “It’s not as if we’ll teach them all we know the day that they arrive,” she said. “We’ll teach them small things, simple things to start. And if that’s all that they can learn, then we can send them home. The brighter students, ones who earn our trust and pass our tests, can stay and delve deeper. You worry too much, Scar.”

“I do not worry too much!” Scarlette tried not to stomp her foot, and failed. “Even simple magic can be used toward evil ends. All magic deserves our utmost care! Surely you agree with me, Beatrix?” she said, and turned around.

Beatrix’s face was unreadable. She closed her eyes, breathed in, then out, and said, “Scholastica, please keep going. I wish to hear more of your proposal.”

Scholastica brightened. Scarlette’s face only grew darker. “You wish to hear more?” she said, and advanced upon Beatrix.

Beatrix stared impassively back up. “Do you truly believe there are only nine good witches in the world, Scarlette?” Her words were quiet, but incisive, like an assassin’s daggers. “Would you have us turn from witches to dragons, hoarding our trove of knowledge and giving nothing away?”

Scarlette staggered back. The ground was shifting underneath her feet, and she felt a concession needed to be made. “We needn’t be like dragons, but—but at least there must be some requirement for entry!” She clenched her fist. “Some way to ensure that magic only goes to those who do deserve it.”
There. Now she was on firmer ground. Some of the less-confident heads around the circle were nodding now. Woodward looked around, and seemed somewhat defeated. “Fine. Some entry requirements,” she said. “Some very lax entry requirements. And stricter tests before we teach them stronger magic. Is that acceptable?”

Scarlette did not feel confident that she could ask for more, and so she nodded. “I accept.” She sat back down upon her stone, and tried not to look too dismayed. The idea wasn’t fully crazy, with some small provisions. Maybe.

“Thank you, Woodward,” Beatrix said, “but I believe I asked Scholastica to speak.”

“Right.” Woodward blushed and sat back down as well. Scholastica stepped forward, and renewed fire shone from her eyes. She waved her wand, and parchment popped out of the air in front of her. The diagrams upon the parchment detailed something like a castle, and a lot of work had clearly gone into the drawing: just how long had this been on Scholastica’s mind?

Without Scholastica between them, Woodward and Scarlette were next to one another. “Hey,” said Woodward, leaning close, “I didn’t mean to shut you down.”

“No, you didn’t shut me down,” Scarlette said with a sigh. “I just… want to be careful. That is all.” She paused, and added, “Sorry that I called you senseless.”

“It’s all right. I am a little senseless.” Woodward laughed under her breath. “And hey, you’ll have to walk a lot less, right?”

Scarlette laughed at that. She reached her hand out, fingers splayed, and Woody took it and squeezed. Then, Scarlette returned her attention to Scholastica. “And,” she was saying, “we will house the students on site, too. The Luna Nova school will be a place for witches all around the world to call their home.”

And Scarlette had to smile at that, because she’d found one here too. And if some lesser witches also wished it, how could she say no?

A place to call home.

Tiff gasped, and staggered backward into Mani’s bed. “Oh my gosh,” she wheezed.

“What happened?” Mani asked, crawling across her bed and holding her hands out, as if trying to catch her. “You were frozen for a moment there!”

“You didn’t see? The bright light, and those visions, and—” Tiff shook her head to try to clear it, to get her bearings. “Of course you didn’t.”

“Just saw the bright light,” Char said from her bed, “and then you lost your balance, and… well, I can see that.”

Tiff focused on the Shooting Star, but it was difficult. It was rotating around its central axis at blinding, blurring speed, and shining brighter and brighter by the second. There was a humming in the air, as if the Shooting Star were a drill bit. Then it twisted in midair and started drawing on an invisible canvas, carving red outlines into the universe. Tiff’s eyes watered as she watched.
And when it was done, the outline of Scarlette was there. Scarlette, one of the Olde Witches, standing on the floor of her dorm room, oh dear goodness, her actual literal physical dorm room. Scarlette, grabbing the Shooting Star in her hand and bounding forward. There was just one little issue—

“Hey, Tiffany!” Scarlette said, her voice high and nasally as she got right into Tiff’s face. “You wanna ditch these losers and go flying?”

—Scarlette looked about twelve years old.

Chapter End Notes

And that marks the end of this arc, and of its weekly updates! I'm afraid the next chapter will coming in as little time as a week.

But there is good news: I'm devoting my NaNoWriMo to this fic, so the next update shouldn't be too long! Expect something a tad less intense than this arc was.

I hope you've all been enjoying my story! Let me know if you have any feedback or find any issues, and have a Happy Halloween! (Depending on your time zone!)
“Oh shit!” Alice yelped, as her foot skidded in the mud.

Her arms pinwheeled, her torso pitched forward—and then a strong hand was grabbing her arm, holding her steady. She panted for a few seconds, then looked up at Ximena, who’d been jogging beside her. “Thanks,” she managed.

Ximena smiled. “Anytime! I’m not gonna leave you to fall.”

Alice nodded, and then got back to it.

It was a rainy morning in late October, and the scent of wet dirt was as omnipresent as the moisture in the air: not most people’s idea of a great day for exercise. But Alice was different. Alice wasn’t gonna stop for anything.

The secret, as far as she could tell, was to play little tricks on yourself. Run and don’t look at the ground, and don’t feel your feet, and don’t think about your burning legs, because if you aren’t paying attention then it doesn’t count and doesn’t really drain you. Promise your lungs, your muscles, that as soon as you make it past the next turn, you’ll definitely be done for the day—and then, as soon as you get there, break your promise and keep going. It was less a battle against the track, and more a fight against her own body. And this fight would take every underhanded dirty scheme in the book to win.

How lucky that she’d had years of practice.

As the two of them jogged past the stands, she glanced up at Rain, who—unlike the poncho-wearing Alice and Ximena—was sitting cross-legged in everyday clothes, reveling in the weather. “This is all your fault,” Alice called out.

Rain’s eyes opened. “Hm?”

“You know, because the ground is slick,” Alice panted, “from all this rain… actually, no, that’s a pun. Terrible. Don’t laugh at it.” She turned to glare at Ximena. “Don’t!”

Ximena flinched. “I—I wasn’t laughing. I don’t know why you assume I would.”

“I dunno!” Alice panted for a few more seconds before continuing, as she and Ximena jogged around the track. Conversation was another trick you could play, if you could spare the air required for it. “I've only known you for, like... a month and a half. Maybe you'll turn out to be a dirty pun-lover and I'll have to throw the whole friendship away!”

She snorted. Ximena didn't. Alice looked over a few seconds later. “I’m kidding,” she gasped, because she didn’t have that much air to spare, “please don't leave me.”

The two of them sped up as they approached the end of the loop, with no difficulty on Ximena’s part but a hell of a lot on Alice’s. She could only fool her body for so long, and as she kept going it wised up: her muscles flared, her breaths heaved, and she couldn’t focus.

After an infinite length of time, or what a stopwatch would probably have called thirty seconds,
they were done. “All right,” Ximena said, bouncing on her feet and probably still at her resting
heart rate like usual. “Ready?”

Alice grinned, sucking huge breaths through her teeth. “This is baloney,” she muttered. “I've been
jogging for like forever and it still feels like I just started doing this. When is it supposed to get
easier?”

“It mostly doesn't.” Ximena stretched one arm across her body, then the other. “You just get better
at it.”

“Woohoo.”

Alice forced herself to stand upright, then walked over to the side of the track, where stood a
simple, shiny red bike. After raising the kickstand and wheeling it onto the track, she sucked in yet
another breath, then heaved her leg over the side and her butt onto the seat.

“If you need help, I can spot you—”

“I can do this!” Alice snapped, and Ximena’s hand dropped almost before she’d raised it. “I can do
this. I’ve done it before.” This was riding a bicycle, after all. It was the standard by which other
never-forget-it activities were judged. She closed her eyes for a second, then opened them. She had
this.

Alice planted her feet on the pedals and, incredibly enough, she started moving.

“Woo!” Rain called from the stands. Alice couldn't stop smiling, feeling her legs pump against the
pedals as if they themselves had forgotten their fatigue. She leaned forward, shifted up a gear, and
sped up along the track until she was flying—not literally flying, of course, but honestly this was at
least as good.

And then she came to the turn. And she wasn't sure if she slipped in the rain or hit a patch of mud
just plain screwed up, but the next thing she knew the ground was coming up to meet her.

Her poncho expanded like an airbag, breaking her fall.

“Alice, watch—!” Ximena's cry cut off. “Oh. That's new. You’re okay?”

Alice laughed a little, her face a full foot from the ground. “A little automagic I cooked up,” she
said. A few seconds later her poncho deflated, letting her gently down to the track, and she easily
put her hands out to catch herself. “I was getting pretty tired of eating pavement... or, uh, whatever
this track is made of.” Pushing herself to a crouch, she tapped her hand on the slightly springy
surface.

“Clay.” Ximena stuck out her hand and pulled Alice up. “Wanna go again, or are you gonna head
to breakfast?”

Alice fumbled in her pocket for her phone, checked the time, then sighed. “Breakfast. You'll catch
up?”

“Same as always. Adios!” And with that, she set off at a fast jog along the track, easily twice
Alice's running speed and without apparent effort.

Alice sighed. A month and a half of exercise, and some days it felt like it didn't matter at all.
Ximena was always going to be able to do that, but Alice, on the other hand… Why would
Ximena ever wait up for her at all? What would the point be?
“Yo, dude.” Alice glanced at Rain, who’d walked over. “How was the fall? You okay?”

Alice shrugged. Rain pulled out an acupuncture needle and waved it in a questioning way, but Alice waved it away. “You do you,” Rain said. “Also, quick question. Mind if I ask?”

“Mm.” Alice’s grunt was noncommittal as she took her wand from her pocket.

“What’s so great about riding a bike that you’d go out in the rain to do it?” Rain frowned. “It’s like a broom but, like, worse in every way.”

Alice ignored her and tapped the bike twice with her wand. “Mutati converso.”

“More moving parts, less speed, more effort, I’m pretty sure it can’t fly—” Rain stopped talking as Alice’s bike shimmered, then came apart at the welds and rearranged itself like complicated clockwork. Within five seconds, it had rotated and stretched and shrunk and resolved itself back into her mobility scooter. “Okay, credit where credit’s due, that was cool. But bikes are still squaresville.”

“I haven't ridden a bike in years.” Alice propped her knee up on her scooter and started pushing herself along, and Rain followed along beside her. “My mom taught me how to do it, back in Central Park. It was....” She sniffed. “She’s not always around, with her jobs and all, but she did teach me how to ride a bike. It was our thing for a while, on the weekends, until... well, until this.”

“Oh, makes sense.”

“Yeah. Kinda means a lot to me. You got a problem with that, Rain?” Alice stared at her accusingly.

Rain held up her hands. “Chill, dude, no one said I was harshing your mellow. Enjoy your bike rides.”

They continued across the field. As always, pushing a scooter over rainy soil was a pain in the rear, adding additional aches to Alice’s already aching legs. And as always, she wouldn’t be able to actually get back into Luna Nova without walking up a short staircase—only three steps long, but that was enough to be infuriating—

Alice stopped a dozen yards away from the school, because the stairs weren’t looking like they always did. Specifically, someone had laid out a metal ramp beside them, which jutted out far past the end of the stairs to give it a shallower angle.

The someone in question was still there: a rain-soaked woman in a tracksuit kneeling in the grass by the ramp, her wand casting a shimmering aura around it as it moved left and right in minute increments. Her voice was barely audible over the drizzle: “Come on, come on... almost... there!” And with a final tiny adjustment, her magic released the ramp to settle into the grass.

The witch stood up straight, turned around, and noticed Alice and Rain at last. “Oh! Hello! Looks like I was just in time!” She hurried over, smiling in a way that almost wasn’t nervous. “I was just... well, now that we’re trying to include students from all walks of life—or not walks necessarily which is the point—I’ve been telling the school that we really need to get DDA compliant, but it’s always been stuff about how we’re a historic building and don’t have to change for anyone, and it would ‘ruin the facade’, or something like that.”

She drew herself up in a close approximation of pride, although Alice could see the strain in her smile. “So... enough is enough, actually! And I’m doing it myself, but it’s a big job, so if there’s anywhere you’d like me to prioritize just let me know, okay?” She frowned for a moment, looking
at them, but then nodded. “Alice Gainesbury and Rain Williams, right? You know where my office is?”

Alice blinked at her a few times, and then comprehension dawned. “Oh, you’re Professor Chariot! Yes, I, I know where.” In Alice’s own defense, the professor’s tracksuit and her drenched, loose hair didn’t make her look much like the turbo-nerd who taught Magical Astronomy.

Professor Chariot smiled. “Well, let me know how the ramp works for you. Later, I mean, because I’m gonna get some exercise while I’m out here. Why waste such a nice day, after all?” With another little smile, she was off in the direction of the track, jogging through the drizzle.

Alice stared after her for a while, then looked down at the ramp. It was metallic, and ridged, and absolutely didn’t match the stately stone steps to the side. And when she pushed her scooter up the ramp, it was way easier than carrying up the stairs. She sighed in relief.

“She seems cool.” Rain said. “Also, yo, can I ask another question?

Alice shrugged.

“I thought knee scooters were, like... for broken legs and feet and junk like that.” Rain frowned. “And getting it up stairs and stuff seems like a real pain in the butt for you. Does it really help you with the tiredness thing?”

Alice had to laugh at that, just a little. “That's really funny.”

“Mm?”

“Yeah, because the thing is, I don't use this thing for me. I use it for everyone else.”

Alice shoved herself up against the outer Luna Nova wall, where the rain wasn't quite as bad. “OK, that’s a lie, I guess. It's a little enchanted to make moving around easier: less friction, lighter weight, yadda yadda. But mostly?” She paused to collect her thoughts. “I got this disease, the doctors say it’s probably Chronic Fatigue Syndrome or whatever, when I was nine, okay? And I got the scooter when I was ten. Wanna know what happened in that year-long gap?”

Rain watched, her expression neutral.

“A year of—of people acting like I was just being some stupid lazy kid, because all of a sudden I couldn't get through a school day anymore.” Anger rose in her throat, adding stutters to her speech. “Like-like that was just me staying up late all the time or something. And, and not an incurable disease, you freaking morons!” she shouted, out into the open air.

The drizzle continued to fall, swallowing her shouted words without returning an echo. Alice shook herself, then raised her wand and muttered under her breath: a hemisphere of air solidified above her to block the rain, as if she were holding an invisible umbrella. “Sorry. Anyway, yeah, the people being stupid about it were worse than the part where I couldn't stay awake. So my mom got me this for my tenth birthday. And now,” she said, laughing, “at least I look like a cripple, so people take it seriously… mostly….”

She trailed off, and noticed that Rain wasn't talking, and also that she had a steady stream of water streaming onto her exposed hair. Alice looked up and realized it was from her own umbrella. She sheepishly mumbled a corollary spell, and the umbrella broadened until it fully covered Rain as well. “Sorry.”

Rain shrugged. “Yo, dude, check that out.” She pointed off toward the track.
“Were you even listening, dude?”

“I was, and also, not a dude. Seriously, look.”

Alice followed the line of her finger, and saw that Chariot had started jogging on the track. Her form was really good, way better than Alice knew her own was: Chariot didn’t look like she was dying even a little. No, her strides were long and confident, she seemed to be having no trouble with breathing, and she was easily outpacing Ximena as she jogged along... which maybe wasn’t that much of an accomplishment, when Alice thought about it, since Ximena was fifteen and Chariot was old. How old was she, anyway?

And then Chariot rounded the bend, and hit the same muddy patch that Alice had. Chariot went down hard: arms flailing, mouth yelping, face-first. Alice burst out laughing. It wasn’t a long outburst, but it still counted as one. A few moments later, when she collected herself, she saw Rain side-eyeing her. “What?” Alice said, wiping her face. “Did you see that pratfall? It was like a cartoon.”

Rain shrugged, and the two of them kept watching. Chariot pushed herself upright with a grimace, looked down at her sodden trackshirt, and groaned. She unzipped it, and cast it aside, and—

Oh, wow. She was ripped under there. Alice could count her abs below her sports bra—there actually seemed to be a couple more than usual—and those biceps looked like they could send a fist through concrete. Chariot rolled her shoulders, showing off even more musculature, and then set off again.

Ximena, who’d still been running, slowed to a halt like a rubbernecking motorist. She stood there, watching Chariot for several seconds, and then turned to face Alice and Rain. Unless Alice was wrong, the word she was mouthing was, “Goals!”

“Tiffany! Hey, Tiffany!”

“Ghwuzzh.”

“Wake up!”

It was like being woken up by a dog, if the dog had a pointier snout, and could talk, and also could fly... okay, it was very little like being woken up by a dog. Also, Tiff reflected as she blinked her eyes open, she would probably enjoy being woken up by an eager puppy. Being woken up by Scarlette, on the other hand?

“Psst! Tiffany!” Scarlette whispered, and the Shooting Star jabbed her in the stomach again, making her wince. Through bleary eyes, Tiff saw Scarlette’s ethereal form hunched over the broom to fit beneath the ceiling. Tiff sighed: it wasn’t as if she was corporeal enough to worry about bumping her head, right? How did she even work?

She’d learned a few things about Scarlette over the past few days. As before, Scarlette was only ever visible or audible to Tiffany herself, although Char and Mani had reported a slight distortion in the air where Scarlette was. Whenever she appeared, her incorporeal form was always in contact with the Shooting Star itself, even if only by the tip of her pinky. That broom was the only way she
could interact with anything: her hands couldn’t move other objects, she didn’t have a wand to do magic, and Tiff couldn’t exactly give her a wand because of the aforementioned hand problem.

And, worst of all, she was nothing like the Olde Witch Tiff had been expecting. Most crucially, she wasn’t olde, or even old. Far from it. “What’s she doing, what’s she doing?” the twelve-year-old Scarlette hissed, pivoting the Shooting Star toward Mani’s big bed in the middle of the room.

Tiff rubbed her eyes, trying not to grumble too loudly, and looked.

Mani had laid out a small rug on her bed, and she was currently kneeling upon it. She paused, then aligned herself with a bullseye on the wall—one she’d drawn several weeks ago, and which Tiff now paid about as much mind as the wallpaper. Then, Mani bent forward until her head was on the rug.

Tiff moaned. “She’s just praying,” she muttered. And if Mani was doing her morning prayers, then it was absolutely too early to be awake. A quick glance around the room confirmed it: only the very first hints of sunlight were creeping into the room through the drapes. She slumped back to horizontal. “Please let me sleep, Scarlette.”

“What’s she praying to?” Scarlette squinted. “Is that circle with the lines through it her god? Is it an idol?”

“No, it’s so she… knows where Mecca is,” Tiff mumbled. “Muslims have to pray toward Mecca.”

“What’s a Muslim?”

Tiff blinked, then rubbed at her forehead. “Oh, right. You predate Islam, don’t you.”

“Who’s Islam? Is he nice?”

“I’m begging you, just let me sleep.”

It was breakfast time. Scarlette had not let her sleep. She was exhausted.

Oh, but not to worry: there would be no chance of Tiff falling asleep now either.

“What is that?” Scarlette whispered, peering over her shoulder. For some reason, it really annoyed Tiffany that Scarlette didn’t have to hover to do this: she looked twelve, and still she was tall enough for that? (Tiff was pretty sure she didn’t have any kind of complex about her height, but moments like this made it hard to be sure.)

Tiffany groaned, not looking at her. “It’s a bagel.”

“Whoaaaa.” Scarlette leaned closer. The Shooting Star, which rested diagonally across her back like a quiver, poked Tiffany in the cheek. “Hey, why’s it got a hole?”

“I don’t know. They just make them that way.”

Tiffany piled several upon her plate, along with packets of butter and cream cheese, and finished off by grabbing a knife. Then she walked around Scarlette and tried to look at the table that was her destination, and not at the many people watching the red broom bobbing behind her. At least it was
currently in its more compact form, with its wings and tail folded up into a manageable brush-like shape. Otherwise it would probably be knocking food off tables as it went, and she’d be even more embarrassed.

Weird. If she’d told the Tiffany of several months ago that she’d soon be spending significant amounts of time with the *Shooting freaking Star*, and also that she’d find it mortifying….

“Here you go,” she said, and placed the plate in the center of the table. The bagel at the top of the stack rolled toward Char. “Though I don’t know why you asked for so many.”

“Maybe I’m really hungry.” Char smiled before grabbing the errant bagel. She ripped into it like a predator tearing flesh from a kill, no butter or cream cheese required.

“You’re *never* this hungry, Char.”

Char gulped. “Got me there.” She turned to Mani, who was blasting magic like usual into her anti-magic stone. “You done discharging into your… thingy?” Char said.

“Nullitite geode,” Tiffany supplied. When Char glanced at her in surprise, she said, “What? I got tired of just calling it as an anti-magic whatsit, so I looked it up. Did you know it’s an incredibly rare metal that’s is believed to have come from meteorites?”

“Yes,” Mani said, returning the stone to her pocket, “I’m done.”

Tiffany slumped.

“All right, Char.” Mani gulped and raised her wand. She looked less scared of it than she had back when Tiff met her, but that wasn’t saying much. “Do it!”

Char took a bagel from the pile, tossed it from hand to hand a couple times, and then chucked it in an arc toward Mani. “*Aegis!*” Mani yelped, and a glimmering shield of energy materialized in front of her wand for a moment—just long enough to deflect the bagel and send it toward the floor.

“Pretty good,” Char said.

“Wasting food,” Tiffany muttered.

Char tossed a couple more at Mani, and each pitch was underhand and pretty gentle, and Mani was able to deflect each one. A smile was growing on her face, bit by bit. Tiffany, despite her annoyance at all the bagels on the floor, couldn’t help but match the smile. “See?” she said. “Just a little effort, and you’re doing it!”

And then Char took a final bagel and, without warning, flung it right at Mani’s face like a fastball. Mani hid her face with both hands and shrieked out, “*Aegis!*”

The shield materialized again, and deflected the bagel. The bad news was, it didn’t materialize for just a moment.

“What?” Mani shifted her wand hand aside, just enough to peek out at the cocoon of energy shield that surrounded her. Then she groaned mightily. The sound was muffled through the barrier. “Oh, *come on!* I was doing so well!” Little sounds of laughter came from the surrounding students as Mani planted both her hands on the cocoon and shoved, and it didn’t budge an inch. One of the laughs, Tiff noticed, was Scarlette’s.

“Nah, mate, don’t sweat it.” Char leaned forward in her seat and slapped the shield twice, making
Mani wince as it reverberated. “That was mostly pretty good.”

“Mostly? ” Mani’s jaw was clenching. “How about I help you practice for a change?”

But Char was bending over to grab one of the fallen bagels. “Nah, I’m doing all right. Besides, that’s not my style.” She brushed her hand over the bagel a few times, then dug in.

Mani sighed. “Can someone help me out of this?”

Tiff was already out of her seat and drawing her wand. “Char,” she said with a roll of her eyes, “don’t eat food off the floor. Fos Machi —”

Something hooted next to her. She paused, repeated the spell—“Fos Machiari”, and a magical knife sprouted from the end of her wand—then turned to see what the noise was. “An owl?”

“Oh, yeah.” Char’s voice was muffled by her mouthful of dough. “I think the guy from the Last Wednesday Society does those now. You know, the magic item cafe?” She swallowed before continuing, which was nice because it meant she wasn’t spraying food everywhere. “I hear a bunch of students are getting stuff shipped through his place, so he uses the owls to let people know when their stuff is in. You expecting something, Tiff?”

The owl in question did seem to be intently focused on Tiffany. It flapped around her, and didn’t stop until Tiff took the small envelope from its beak, whereupon it hooted happily and tried to land on the Shooting Star. Scarlette snatched the broom away at the last moment with a huff. The owl flapped indignantly around at that, before landing on the table and pecking at some crumbs Char had sprayed onto the surface.

Tiff frowned, still sawing with her magical knife at Mani’s shield. “No, I don’t… actually, hold on.” Deactivating her wand, she used both hands to rip open the envelope, and the short message within confirmed her suspicions. “Oh, I forgot about that stupid thing. No idea when I’ll find the time to go pick it up, tho—urk—”

Something had grabbed her by the back of the collar and yanked. A moment later, she found herself tripping backward onto the Shooting Star. “Well,” Scarlette said, releasing her shirt, “no time like the present!”

“You can grab me?” Tiff said, right before—

Whoosh.

They were on the Luna Nova grounds—they were at the leyline entrance—they were in the leyline—they were out of the leyline at the Glastonbury Tor—they were above Blytonbury—they were swooping down the street, and Tiff glimpsed the sign that said “Last Wednesday Society” right before the Shooting Star burst through the door.

It took about twenty seconds, thirty at the most, and she was pretty sure she didn’t stop wailing the whole time.

The shop proprietor, who’d been in the middle of pouring some water, froze. After a few seconds, the cup overfilled and started leaking onto the floor. “Er,” he said, “welcome?”

Tiff stopped screaming. She heaved a breath. “Apparently, I’d like to pick up a package, please,” she whimpered. “Tiffany Vandergard?”

As the proprietor grumbled and ducked beneath the counter, Tiff turned around. Scarlette was
riding behind her on the Star, and had the kind of self-satisfied look that was just begging for a punch in the schnoz—and apparently, that was an option now? “You can grab me?” Tiff hissed. “I thought you couldn’t interact with anything but the Star!”

“Huh.” Scarlette tapped her chin. “Guess I didn’t really think about it. Actually, does this mean—” She reached over to the counter, where the proprietor had left the full-to-brimming cup, and tried to shove it with her ethereal hand. It was like she was trying to move a mountain; even when she grabbed it with both hands, braced her feet against the counter, and pulled with all her might, there was no movement.

“Oh, fine,” she said, panting as she returned to her seat upon the Star, “seems like I can’t affect material things.”

“Except for me.”

“Yeah!” Scar turned around and beamed. “I guess it’s cuz we’ve got a special bond!”

It was such a joyous smile that Tiff couldn’t bring herself to reply in any mean way—and since she didn’t have anything nice to say, she didn’t say anything at all.

“Er, here it is,” the proprietor said, and emerged holding a box about the size of a DVD player.

Tiff took it reluctantly. “Well, thanks. I guess now we should be heading back—aaaAAAAAMGONNALOSEMYGRIPONTHEPACKAGE —”

At least she didn’t lose her grip on the package.

Scarlette dropped her off in her dorm room, whereupon she dropped the package and explained that, while the broom trips were very fast, she was not interested in being helpfully kidnapped back to the cafeteria. She would rather just take the stairs this time, thank you very much.

And, like, wow. Scarlette was making her prefer taking the stairs to flying. She groaned on the way back down one of the many flights of stairs and cast a resentful glance at the girl hovering behind her, who seemed as happy as could be.

“That’s a good look for you,” Char said, as Tiff trotted back into the cafeteria. She was still leaned back in her chair, as if she hadn’t moved at all. “I’m not being sarcastic or anything, by the way. It’s actually better.”

Tiff frowned. She pulled out her wand and muttered, “Pondero,” and then groaned again: the mirror she’d conjured showed her hair had blown back, and who could blame it? Only now, she looked like a sleazy grifter. With a resigned sigh, she combed it back down with her fingers, returning her hairstyle to its sensible and stylish part on the left. Just the way she liked it.

Char cupped her hands around her mouth. “Booooooo.”

A knocking sound grabbed both their attentions, and they looked to see Mani—still stuck inside her shield, since Tiff hadn’t finished extracting her. “I don’t want to intrude,” she said, peering out through the groove that Tiff had cut, “but… help?”
Char sighed. Then she leaned forward, letting her chair rock back onto all four legs, and got up to walk over to Mani’s shell. “Fos Machiari,” she said, like Tiff had, and carved a hole for Mani as if the shield were a jack-o-lantern. “Cheer up, mate,” she said, “you were doing really well. Some more practice with big sis Akko and you’ll definitely get it.”

Mani rolled her eyes at that. “Yes. I’m sure I will.”

“That’s the spirit.” Char nudged her with an elbow. “And you thought you didn’t like her.”

Mani didn’t say anything about that, but her lips went rather thin.

The three of them set off toward the nearest staircase, and Tiff did some mental math as they ascended. “We’re going to be late to class at this rate,” she announced. “We need to speed it up.”

Char grooooonaaaaned. Tiff wouldn’t usually extend the word in her head like that, but Char’s started at the top of the staircase, and lasted until they reached the next staircase. It had to be a full fifteen seconds. It was actually incredible, and Tiff had to stop and turn around in acknowledgment.

Finally, once she was done, Char yawned in a big breath, and said, “Can’t we just, like, take your super fast broom?”

“I don’t think you’d like it.” Tiff thought a moment. “Or that she would let you.”

“Just convince her. It’s gotta be faster than all those stairs.” Char sat down on the stairs.

“I can’t believe we’re having this conversation—” Tiff paused for a moment, because she realized she absolutely could believe she was having this conversation, but this was no time to bring that up—“when we could actually be moving. I promise you, my overeager broom is not going to help us get there any….”

She paused for a bit longer than a moment. The overeager broom in question had stopped too, and she was peering at a nondescript wall next to the base of the stairs. After a few seconds of this, Scarlette pressed her palm against a brick, and then did the same with her fingertips—and then she froze. Then she smacked her face, and turned around to run over to Tiffany. “I’ve found it. Now come over here!”

“Found what?”

“Just come on over here.” She grabbed Tiff by the sleeve and led her to the wall, and Tiff followed. “You two also,” Scarlette commanded, and since neither Char nor Mani could see her, Tiff rolled her eyes and beckoned them over. “Now,” Scarlette said, as the three of them gathered next to a wall that looked like every other wall the school owned, “just do what I do.”

She took Tiff’s hand and placed it on a brick. Then she placed her own hand next to Tiff’s, her palm touching the stone. Tiff mirrored it. She also mirrored it when Scarlette pressed all five fingertips against it, and then just her thumb, middle, and pinkie fingertips. She watched a little more dubiously when Scarlette bumped it twice with her fist, but followed along.

Then, Scarlette hauled back, and yelled, and punched the brick—and nothing happened, unless you counted how she yelped afterward and shook her hand.

After a few seconds, when it became clear that Tiff wasn’t interested in doing that, Scarlette grumbled. “You have to do it like I showed you!”
“Do I have to yelp and jump around too?”

“No, that was optional.”

Tiff looked from side to side, but Mani and Char seemed fully invested in this ridiculous performance. “Fine. Fine! And then can we please get to class!” After checking around herself to see that no one else was watching, she hauled back, and yelled, and punched the brick—

And the wall split in two, down the middle.

The two halves of the wall each rotated around as if this were a secret panel in Scooby Doo, and Tiff found herself being pressed forward alongside Mani and Char. When the grinding and the rotation had stopped, they were in a dim and narrow shaft, like being at the bottom of a well. Tiffany looked up and saw no signs that any living thing had been here in years, decades, even centuries. She couldn’t even see spiderwebs.

She looked back down to see Scarlette grinning. “Now, which floor is your class on?” Scarlette said, in a slow voice as if explaining to a child. “Say it clearly.”

“Mmm…” Tiff frowned. “Third floor?”

And then she jumped, because the stone floor was shaking beneath her. After a few seconds, it started rising, slowly but surely. “Wow,” Scarlette said, bending down and wiping at the dust on the floor—none of which moved under her finger. “This thing hasn’t been maintained at all. Did everyone forget about it?”

Mani gulped. “Is this a secret passage?”

Scarlette’s grin grew wider. “Obviously.” Then she frowned. “Tiffany, please tell her I said ‘obviously’.”

“Scarlette says ‘obviously’,” Tiffany muttered. Then, a bit louder, she said: “And how did you know it was here?”

That was Scarlette’s cue to snort. “Well, that’s because I built it here. Remember?”

“Oh, right.”

The lift shuddered to a halt, and then the wall next to them rotated again, and they found themselves disgorged into a third floor landing. A few passersby looked at them with mild surprise, before getting back to their own classes. Tiffany looked around for a moment, getting her bearings, and realized that the Magic Runes classroom was a thirty second walk from here.

Scarlette jogged up beside her. “Pretty cool, right?”

Tiff looked down at the girl, and said, “What else do you remember?”

“And there’s a secret stash of books inside the library,” Scarlette said. “Although it’s been a while since I checked, so please don’t quote me on that. But there’s definitely this big secret hole where books could be!”
“Yeah?” Tiff said.

“Yeah!” Scarlette beamed, and adjusted herself on the broom. “I’ll show you when we get a moment. You just need to go into this corner, and then—”

“Vandergard!” came the cry from far below. “Focus on your flying, not on your Bluetooth conversation or whatever the hell you’re doing!”

Tiff jumped, and stammered, “O—okay, Professor Nelson!” Technically Tiffany was in the middle of a flying assessment, meant to ensure that the witches of Professor Nelson’s class had learned their basics. Of course, the Shooting Star basically automated the process, so Tiff had taken the time to keep listening to Scarlette’s stories about the history and hidden passages of the school. All she had to do was shift into whatever posture the current broom form required.

She flashed Scarlette an apologetic smile. “Maybe tell me once we’re done with this.”

Scarlette shrugged, and turned around on the Shooting Star so that she was facing forward again. Tiff leaned down over the broom, then went through the rest of the exercises, finishing with a lightning-fast loop around the still-muddy track. Sure, it wasn’t quite as interesting as a history lesson on the secrets of magic’s most prestigious learning institution, but she wouldn’t complain at the chance to feel the wind on her face.

She smiled as she nailed the stop, bringing the Shooting Star to a perfect ninety degree angle to brake before dismounting. Then she gave an expectant look at Professor Nelson.

The professor squinted down at her clipboard, a pen held in one heavily gloved hand. “Strong control of acceleration and deceleration, precise turns, consistent straightaways, ascent and descent normal, and a well executed stop. Well done.” She looked up from the clipboard. “Now do it with an actual broom.”

“With a—with a what?”

“Ex-cuse me?” Scarlette zoomed away from Tiff and toward Professor Nelson, blowing a raspberry in her face—a raspberry that Professor Nelson had no way of perceiving. “I’m the actual-est broom you’ll ever see!”

Nelson pinched the bridge of her nose. “Look, kid. I know I can’t keep this thing from following you around.”

“Indeed you can’t,” Scarlette cut in, as if the professor could hear her.

“But I can stop you from taking an assessment on a broom that does all the work! I mean, if Atsuko Kagari—” she pronounced the first syllable of each name like the A in ‘cat’, not the A in ‘fall’ like it should have been “—could ride that thing before she could fly at all, then anyone could ace a test with it! So go get your real broom and we’ll run the assessment again, okay? Pronto!” She punctuated the order with a blow on her whistle. “Next up from Black Team, Charlotte Jones!”

Tiff winced. “Come on,” she hissed to Scarlette, “let’s go so I’m not leaving them alone for long.”

Scarlette glanced around at the ‘them’ in question: Char was ambling toward the field with all her usual energy, which might mean it would be ten minutes before she started, and Mani was doing breathing exercises that were doing nothing to help her stay calm. “Yeah, I can see exactly what you mean.” She made room on the Shooting Star for Tiff to hop on behind her, and then zoomed off toward the tower that contained the Black Team’s dorm room—at a mercifully sane speed.
seemed to be muttering under her breath.

“What?” Tiff said,

“Then anyone could ace a test with it,” Scarlette said in a satirical sing-song. “As if I’d ever let just anyone ride me!” She rolled her eyes. “That Nelson woman, she’s ridiculous.”

“Hey, you have to listen to her. She’s a teacher.”

“All right, then I’ll amend: that Nelson teacher is ridiculous.”

Tiff frowned. “Why did you let Akko Kagari ride you?” she asked, as the Star reached their room’s window. She magicked the window open and hopped in.

“Well, that’s….”

Tiff grabbed her normal broom, then looked back around to see that Scarlette had frozen with her body halfway through the window, and with one finger raised. “I don’t….” She winced, and rubbed at her temple. “It’s kind of hard to think about.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean before, when I was just a broom. I can’t recall a lot of things from then.” Scarlette shook her head. “Um… Akko, maybe I remember her?”

Tiff stepped closer. “Do you… remember me?”

“Do I remember you?” Scarlette stared blankly at her, before grinning with an overloud snort. “Of course I do. I saved you from those plants two months ago.”

Tiff smiled, and hopped back on the Shooting Star with her own broom in tow.

By the time they got back, Char was lying with her back on the grass. Several yards away, Mani was lying with her face plowed into the grass.

Tiff immediately put her face in her hands and whimpered, “I left for five minutes.”

“These are potion ingredients,” Tiff said.

“Yeah,” Mani murmured.

“They have the same effects no matter who’s holding them.”

“Yeah?”

“And if you put them in the pot in the correct amounts, and follow the correct instructions, then the potion will come out the same no matter who’s stirring it.”

“Yeah.”

“So what are you afraid of?” Tiff hissed, throwing up her hands.
The three of them huddled at the back of the smoky Potions room, sharing a table and one large, smoking cauldron. And for now it was only three of them: Scarlette had muttered something about the room being too heavy with fumes, deactivated her projection (which was apparently an option?), and now the Shooting Star rested against a corner.

“Mate,” Char said, giving Tiffany a look, “what do you think she’s afraid of?”

“An explosion, obviously! I can recognize a pattern!” Tiff rolled her eyes. “But in this case it’s actually impossible, unless you think there’s any way you can detonate a simple language potion! Now can you please add the fish tongues?”

Mani was still grimacing. “Can’t you just—”

“I’ve done this potion before, at home! You need to do it so you can learn! Put in the effort!”

Mani turned away from her and cast a beseeching glance at Char, but Char simply shrugged.

“Tiffany?” Mani said. “The instructions said ‘bubbling slightly’, right?”

“Yeah,” Tiffany said, returning her attention to the pot, “it should be bubbling… slightly….” It was bubbling, but not slightly. The purple, sludgy concoction was boiling despite the tiny flame beneath it, and glops were starting to fly out and stain the table. Tiff snatched the textbook away from one such fleck and scrutinized it. “Did we miss a step? Water, mandrake root, fish tongues, stir—”

Someone tapped her shoulder. She looked up to see Scarlette on her side, with one hand pinching her nose. “Hey,” she said, her voice more nasal than usual, “did I hear you say it didn’t matter which of you was adding the ingredients?” Her expression was deadly serious, even if her voice was amusingly nasal.

“Um….” Tiff looked from side to side. “I… guess?”
Scarlette’s eyes narrowed. “Get a neutralizer, now.”

“A what—”

Scarlette grabbed Tiff’s hands and yanked them over to the side of the table, where a large collection of potential ingredients had been gathered. Tiff winced as her hands were clumsily puppeteered, knocking bottle after bottle to the floor—but after a few seconds, Scarlette gasped. “There!” It was a large blue cylinder labeled Neutralizer, just like she’d said. “Pour that in right now!”

The potion was splashing up above the cauldron, higher and higher as it threatened to splatter the ceiling. Tiff grabbed the neutralizer, yanked the cap off, and threw the whole thing in.

The effect was immediate: the splashes died down until, within a matter of seconds, they were back under the lip of the cauldron. A few seconds after that, the potion had ceased all activity.

“Whew! That could have been a second Babel.” Scarlette rolled her eyes. “Now you see that yes, it matters which witch handles the ingredients. It’s obvious, as long as you just take some time to think.”

“How’s it obvious?” Tiff said.

Scarlette snorted. She hopped up onto the table, giving her a height advantage over Tiff. “The witch is adding her own magic to the potion in the first place, dummy. That’s what makes them potions and not chemicals. And yes, most witches have about the same amount to add… but this one, not so much.” She leaned over and tapped Mani on the head, who obviously didn’t react. “She needs to learn control, or else she’ll never make a potion in her life. So please,” she said, giving another tap, “put in the effort!”

“Oh,” Tiff said. “Ohhhh….” She stared at Scarlette. “I didn’t know that.”

Scarlette tapped her own nose and winked. “Olde Witch, remember? I invented this.” And for the first time since Tiff had known her, she really looked like one, too.

A groan from the side grabbed her attention, and Tiff turned to see Mani glaring at her. “So I would call that an explosion.”

Tiff snorted. “Okay, a little. But I stopped it!”

Mani kept giving her that look for a few seconds. Then she looked back down at the cauldron, wherein the potion had congealed into something like a scab. She poked at it a few times, then brought her finger to her mouth and gave a cautious lick. Then she shook her head. “Cêākrrm.” Which, Tiff happened to know, was not Thai.

“Châychna!”

The call had gone up from across the room. Tiff looked over to see, who else, Alice and her new friends clustered around a more successful-looking potion. Alice, by the looks of it, had just sipped a spoonful from the cauldron, and judging by the expression on her face, it seemed to have worked out well for her. She whisked her wand through the air, conjuring three floating cups, and then sent the potion out of the cauldron in a fountain that split it into three even portions, one for each team member. “Chiyo!” she said, and the three girls drank up in unison.

Once they’d put their cups down, they started up an animated discussion in what Tiff assumed was Thai. As they did, however, Alice—very deliberately—looked her way and gave her a huge wink.
“Wonderful!”

That was Professor Lukić, hobbling over to Alice’s group at the front of the room. She was smiling in that way that meant she was either genuinely happy, or about to put children in an oven to eat later. “And since I’ve drunk my own potion before this class, I can tell you that your Thai is quite fluent.” Alice beamed at that.

“As for you three,” Lukić said, and her expression turned to a scowl that looked like the children had escaped from the oven. She doddered over to the Black Team’s table, her staff tapping as she went. “You seem to have ruined your cauldron, at least until it can be given a proper scrubbing—which you can do after class.”

Tiff managed not to groan at that, but it was a close thing.

“Reddened child.” Lukić’s finger jabbed at her. “Come with me to get a replacement cauldron, so you can try again.” Without further ado, she turned around and hobbled toward a closet door near the front of the room. Tiff followed her the whole way, trying not to focus on the smug look Alice was beaming at her.

They walked through the office door, and it closed itself with another tap of Lukić’s cane. “I’ll admit,” she said, “you made a nice save with the neutralizer there.” She cackled. “Not that it was your idea, of course!”

Tiff blinked. She started forward. “You can see her?”

“Ssh.” Lukić held a finger to her lips, turning around as she rummaged through piles of potion equipment with her other gnarled hand. “We are the Nine. We recognize our own. Or we should… she doesn’t seem to see me yet. Curious! As if something’s still missing from her, no?”

Tiff looked down and away.

“Well, come help me look. It’s your damn cauldron.”

As if she’d been kicked squarely in the behind, Tiff jolted forward and started rummaging alongside her. “Can I ask a question?” she said, and when Lukić nodded, she continued. “What was Scarlette like, when you knew her?”

“No! what can I dredge from the murky swamp of memory?” Lukić scratched at her cheek. “Headstrong. Always certain she was in the right, that she knew better than everyone else. The trouble being, of course, that she usually did. Quite frustrating when she was right, and disastrous when she was wrong.” But then she smiled. “And yet… fiercely devoted to the noblest causes she could find. Does that remind you of anyone?”

Tiffany shrugged. “Well, yes. Most of it sounds like how she is now, at least a little.”

“Of course it does, reddened child.”

Finally Tiff’s hands closed around a cauldron, buried in a heap of… well, frankly, she didn’t wanna speculate on what it was buried in a heap of, but she did feel like she needed to wash her hands. This dark closet needed some better organization. She pulled the cauldron out with a sigh of relief, then said, “Thank you,” and turned to leave. There was probably still time to make the potion right.

“Oh, reddened child?”
Tiff stopped and looked around.

“Remind the lazy one, why don’t you, that each team member needs to make a positive contribution to the potion, if that team member wishes to receive any sort of grade. And that this does not include ‘moral support’.” Lukić frowned, and scratched at her cheek again. “In fact… yes, she can be the one to scrub the failed potion out.”

Tiff sighed, then opened the door and trotted out to her friends. She plopped the cauldron down in the middle of the table, then levitated the old one under the table—no way was she touching that. “All right, we’ll start again. And Char? You can put the ingredients in this time.”

“Boo.”

Next up: Professor Badcock’s class, General Spellcasting 101. Well, that wasn’t the exact name, but the exact name filled three lines at the top of the syllabus, so General Spellcasting 101 was how Tiffany always said it in her head.

It wasn’t as if she ever paid a huge amount of attention during class. Sure, she was listening in a sense, and taking good notes—her mother hadn’t raised a fool—but it was paying attention in the same way as as a person ‘paid attention’ to riding a bike. Eventually it became rote, freeing up the brain to focus on what it actually cared about.

Alice was sitting across the room, seated in front of her mobility scooter, and Tiffany kept glancing at her.

Unlike Tiffany, Alice was working very hard to pay attention, and moreover, she was failing. Tiffany had seen it often enough to know the signs: the way her handwriting kept devolving from precise strokes to errant scrawls, or how her head kept sagging forward only to jerk back to vertical. Considering how Ms. Badcock was droning on, she could hardly blame Alice.

They should have been at the same table. They should have been roommates together, and Tiffany would have been able to help her get through long classes, and then they’d chat after curfew about magic and theory and spellcraft and potions and flying—

“Miss Gainesbury!”

The words interrupted the droning lecture like a gunshot. Alice, who’d been at the ‘sagging’ part of her tiredness cycle, jerked back up. “Yes, Professor?” she said, eyes wide.

“Are you able to answer I’ve just asked? About the source of the Triskelion’s power?”

Tiff glanced at the board, which bore a glowing chalk representation of the Grand Triskelion. Her mind helpfully filled in some information: Professor Badcock had been talking about the power of the Nine Olde Witches, and early Luna Nova history, and she was pretty sure she’d be able to answer the question if she’d been asked it.

Alice, apparently, hadn’t gotten all of that. She was clearly screwing up her face in concentration, but before she could even attempt to answer—

“Apparently not.” Badcock snorted, and tapped the board with her wand, causing the Grand
Triskelion’s drawing to circle slightly. “If you’d been paying attention, you’d probably have been able to tell me that the Grand Triskelion wasn’t inherently magical in and of itself. What made it magical—” nine circles appeared around the Triskelion, and they emitted dotted lines that spiraled into the center of the Triskelion “—was the magic poured into it by the Nine Olde Witches. Magic which turned it into the most powerful, and most unique, magical location in the world. Now is that interesting enough to hold your attention, Miss Gainesbury, or will you be leaving us for Dreamland again?”

A little titter of laughter arose from the class at that. Alice glowered down at the professor. “I’m not,” she said, growling each word with particular enunciation, “doing this on purpose.”

“Well, do try not to stay up as late tonight as you must have last night, then!”

Alice’s cheeks flamed, and if looks could kill then Professor Badcock would probably have been cold on the floor by now. Since they couldn’t, Tiff just watched Alice glower ineffectually as Professor Badcock returned to her lecture. “Now, as I was saying before that interruption…”

“You interrupted yourself,” Tiff whispered. Quietly, because it was a teacher talking.

She glanced back at Alice, and saw her weird hippie friend sticking needles in her back, as if that was supposed to help. The other one, the one who seemed more muscle than person, gave her some encouraging thumps on the back—not where the needles were. Seriously, did Alice think that getting quack science and a workout routine was better than—

Tiff wrenched her attention back to her surroundings. Just in time, too: Mani was taking dutiful notes, but Char was just staring vacantly forward, swaying her quill from side to side in a pantomime of writing. “Char!” Tiff hissed.

“What?”

“Are you going to pay attention?”

“Basically?”

“Then why aren’t you taking notes?”

“Eh, don’t need em.”

“Hey, don’t worry.” That was Scarlette popping up behind her, hands on Tiff’s shoulders. “If it’s any consolation, maybe sixty three percent of this is actually what happened.”

Tiff’s head jerked around so fast. “What?”

“We sort of made the Grand Triskelion by accident.” Scarlette tilted her head. “Just magic fallout, coming from the cool new magic we were testing out ourselves. I mean, we noticed later and then sculpted it on purpose, but to start with? Total fluke.”

“Wow.” Tiff’s jaw dropped down low.

“Oh, so you get to talk to your broom but I can’t veg out?” Char muttered from her side. “I see how it is.”

“I’m still trying to take notes,” Mani hissed.

Tiff turned around again to scold Char, but before she could, Professor Badcock was raising her
And what is most important about the Grand Triskelion is that it was new magic! These days, of course, it is ancient, but at the time it was unique, inventive, and had never been seen before. It’s easy to think of Luna Nova as having been founded on old fashioned magic, but the opposite is true: it was founded as the very cutting edge.” She sniffed. “At least, that’s what the Headmistress tells me.”

Tiff noticed a certain curl in the Professor’s lip. “You see, we’re nearing our midterms for the first semester, and this is about the time when I would be telling you all to focus on learning your fundamentals from the old school of magic. But noooo,” she said, and Tiff was astonished to hear the word come out as petulant as a teenager’s whine. “Headmistress Holbrooke instead wants us to focus on updating our curriculum for what she’s calling a ‘new age of magic’.” Here, Badcock seemed to be barely restraining herself from adding the air quotes with her own hands.

Across the room, Alice snorted.

“So, since I clearly can’t question our Headmistress’s infinite wisdom.” Professor Badcock waved her wand, and a piece of paper flew up from under her desk to float in front of her. She read it in a tone of rote resignation: “In one week’s time, the students of General Spellcasting 101”—oh for heaven’s sake, Miranda, that is not the actual name of the class—will be expected to give a presentation demonstrating original magic produced by the students themselves. Each team will work together, and be expected to contribute equally to the demonstration.”

She sighed, then tapped the paper: copies flew out of it, landing in front of every student in the classroom. Tiff squinted down at her copy.

“All right, class dismissed. I hope you all enjoy devising your new magic as much as I’ll enjoy grading this.” Judging by the scowl on Badcock’s face, the amount of enjoyment she was talking about was zero.

Chapter End Notes

Hello again, readers! I'm gonna be publishing weekly for the next six weeks, and I hope you enjoy it, because I've been working hard on this arc for the past several months!

Special thanks to my prereader Hecallsmethischild for taking a read-through of this several months ago, and helping me with key characterization points; MentalVoid from the Diakko Discord server for helping me learn a little more about what living with CFS is like; and everyone who's helped me out with advice or encouragement over the past few months. This arc couldn't have happened without all of your help, or at least it wouldn't have been nearly as good. Thank you for your support!
“Yo, dude?” Rain said, walking alongside Alice.

Alice pushed her foot along the ground, letting her scooter coast for a while—when she was a kid, she’d used to think of herself as a Venetian gondolier when she did this, for fun—and looked at Rain. “Yeah, dude?”

“I’m not a dude, dude.”

Ximena, to Alice’s other side, made a noise of surprise. Or maybe frustration. Hard to tell. “You call everyone else dude.”

“Yeah, but I’m not a dude, dude.”

“I truly fail to see the distinction—”

“Guys,” Alice groaned to the ceiling. Rain frowned at her, and Alice amended herself: “Or, um, girls.” Rain nodded. Alice looked at her again and asked, “You were saying?”

“Yeah, I just… you kinda spaced out after Professor Badcock said that stuff about how you just needed more sleep and stuff. What was that about?”

“Huh, I did?” Alice had just about run out of momentum; she pushed herself along again, chuckling emptily. “I guess I was using up every available neuron on incandescent rage.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” They entered the cafeteria, already swarming with students for lunch time—Alice was obviously the last to arrive, every time. “It’s like being punched in the face, except no one sees it so it’s weird when you get mad about it? And then it’s just… just, urgh.” Her teeth were gritted, and she made an effort to loosen them as she looked at her friend. “You wouldn’t do that to me, right?”

“Nah, dude, that seriously sucks.” Rain slapped Alice on the back (and, knowing her, probably deposited at least one acupuncture needle in the process). “But we’re definitely gonna rock the demonstration, right?”

“Yeah, I can come up with new spells in my sleep—”

Alice paused. She’d been about to dismount her scooter in preparation for the totally unnecessary step in the lunch hall, but something caught her eye. A shallow aluminum ramp, tucked into a corner of the room, with some railings. Professor Chariot had clearly been busy today. “The project’s gonna be a piece of cake, don’t sweat it,” Alice said, pushing herself toward the ramp with a little more spring in her step.

More good fortune: the buffet was fully stocked. Usually the best stuff would be picked over by the time Alice arrived at the cafeteria, but right now every tray and bowl looked full—untouched, even. Alice wheeled herself closer, a grin on her face, as Rain and Ximena walked ahead of her.
She should have known it was too good to last.

“Nope.” Ximena was a couple steps away from the buffet when she turned on her heel and marched away. “Nope nope nope nope nope. Not touching that.”

Rain glanced at her. “What?” Then she looked at the buffet and paused too. A few seconds later, Rain shrugged, grabbed a plate, and started spooning food onto it. That was when Alice got close enough to see what the big deal was: a sign written on paper, right at the head of the buffet line.

None of the food here has been tampered with. Promise.

— S. Manbavaran

“That girl is terrifying,” Mani hissed from her side of the table. Tiff turned in her seat to look where Mani was staring, and saw Sucy herself watching the room from a shaded hallway leading from the lunchroom. Go on, her smile seemed to say. Test your luck.

Tiff smiled, looked her in the eye—Sucy was watching her, right?—and then picked up her sandwich and took a bite. Worst case, Sucy had actually poisoned something, and Sucy would have to show up and give her the antidote. Not so bad, really.

“I mean, why does she do these things?” Mani said, nervously clinking her wand and nullitite stone together. She didn’t have a sandwich, or any food at all. Neither did more than half of the people in the room. Sucy Manbavaran had a well-earned reputation: no one wanted to be on her bad side, and most people didn’t really believe she had a good side either. Best not to be on any of her sides, was the popular opinion. “She’s like some sort of wicked witch!”

Tiff knew better, of course. “Pretty wicked, yeah,” she said without thinking about it. A few seconds later, she did think about it, and her blush flared up. “So, um!” she interjected, trying to interrupt that thought. “What about the… project! Any ideas?”

Mani shook her head glumly. Char, similarly foodless and with her feet on the table as always, shrugged. “You got something, mate?”

“Well, don’t worry. I think I can come up with something, yes.” Tiff smiled. “As long as I’m not —”

“Ooh, what are those red fruits?”

“—distracted. They’re called tomatoes, Scarlette. They’re from the Americas, so I don’t think you would have seen them.” All thoughts of what she might do for the demonstration vanished, not that there had been many, as she looked behind herself and raised the sandwich for inspection.

Scarlette hovered over her shoulder. “Americas, Americas….” She hmm ed, leaning forward onto Tiffany’s shoulder, and Tiff felt the strange, ethereal weight. “Oh, I’ve been there! Tlahuelpuchi was from there!”

Tiff frowned. “Right, of course you could have been there. Between the boots and the broom….”

“They’re great! You ever seen a ziggurat?”
Char yawned widely, then swung her shoes off the table. “Okay. It’s great watching you talk to your imaginary friend and all, but I’m gonna go find some tucker that’s not going to kill me.” She stood up and started walking away across the hall.

“She’s not an imaginary—”

“Don’t fret about her,” said Scarlette. The Shooting Star swooped around the table, with Scarlette’s form sitting on it; then she plopped down into the spot that Char had been occupying, with the Star leaning on her chair. She still kept a hand on it. “She clearly is a witch of no repute, if she can’t focus during class at all. But you’ve got me—and her!”

Tiffany raised her eyebrows. “Huh?”

Scarlette held the Star in one hand and pointed its tip at Mani; Mani recoiled. “The one with so much magic she could burst! I think that there’s some real potential there. And what’s more—she’s a Moor! She must have tons of secret knowledge!” Scarlette beamed.

Tiff tried not to let her dumbfoundedness show too much. What had she just called Mani? And… was it bad? Somehow it felt like Scarlette was being racist, but in no way recognizable to modern ears.

Scarlette cocked her head to the side. “Did I say something weird?”

“Sucy, that wasn’t very nice,” Lotte said, leaning against the wall next to her doubled-over friend.

“I didn’t even do anything,” Sucy wheezed between fits of choking laughter. She’d ducked out of sight first, because this wasn’t exactly evil laughter, and Akko figured she had a reputation to keep. “The food actually didn’t get tampered with!”

Lotte grumbled under her breath. The will-o’-the-wisp perched on her shoulder seemed just as frustrated as she was.

Akko munched on her sandwich, trying not to take sides. On the one hand, Lotte was right that messing with the first years wasn’t a very nice thing to do. On the other hand? It was hilarious. Less than half the students were daring to eat anything, and the others were staring at those daring few as if they were bombs being armed.

“Hey, Akko!”

She chomped a big bite of sandwich, then looked up. “Glad I caught you,” said Char Jones, ambling toward her from the cafeteria in that laid-back way of hers. In terms of being lazy, she could give Amanda a run for her money… well, not a run, exactly. “Wanted to ask you for some advice, big sis.”

Akko quickly swallowed. “You know, I’ve been meaning to ask. Is ‘big sis’ some sort of ironic joke, or do you actually see me as some sort of older sister?”

Char looked troubled for a moment, her expression scrunching up in thought. Then she shrugged. “Eh, either way.”
Oh, Akko was not ready to be an *onee-san*. She gulped, completely unrelated to her sandwich, and said, “What’s up?”

“Well. If I wanted to, hypothetically, find better food than the grub here. In some sort of theoretical way, acquire something that wasn’t poisoned. How would I do that?”

“Hmm.” Akko’s head rocked a little from side to side, deep in thought. “Well, hypothetically, you could always raid the kitchens. They never have that much security, and even if they catch you—”

“Akko!” Lotte hissed. “Stop encouraging the first years to break the rules!”


“I’ll tell you,” Akko said, ignoring Lotte’s groan, “but you have to hypothetically give me half your loot—”

Lotte made a louder noise. Akko looked at her, saw the livid expression on her face—and the way that the will-o’-the-wisp looked about ready to set her hair on fire—and sighed. “Okay, no loot. But I can tell you a fairy who’ll sell you a tart for cheap. Look for Nac Mac, tell him Akko sent you. And, um….” She glanced at Lotte again, who still looked somewhat peeved. “Instead of giving me half… how about you owe me a favor? Nothing big.”

Lotte’s face relaxed, along with the will-o’-the-wisp’s flame, and therefore so did Akko. It was nice to listen to a friend sometimes.

Char shrugged. “All right. Tell me how to get there.”

Akko told her, and Char nodded and walked off toward the kitchen. “Thanks, big sis. See ya.”

“Seriously,” Lotte called after her, “don’t steal anything! You’ll get in trouble!”

“Eh, who cares?” Char yawned, leaning against the wall as she walked. “Not like it’s gonna matter anyway.”

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Well, Mani had had a lousy day.

She’d lost concentration during flight practice, and her face had made a handy plow for the muddy practice field. She’d nearly blown up the entire Potions class. She wasn’t at all confident in her notes for General Spellcasting. And now her stomach was growling, because no way in heck was she eating anything Sucy Manbavaran had touched. She didn’t wanna turn into some kinda… horrible mushroom monster, or something!

All this, and the afternoon had only just begun—and further shenanigans seemed on the horizon.

“So explain this to me again,” Professor Chariot was saying, turned away from the class. Her voice was quiet enough that she seemed to be intending a private conversation, but sound carried well enough in this lecture hall that every student could hear her. “I open this menu.”

“Mm-hmm.” Professor Croix’s hologram stood next to her, peering over her shoulder.

“And then I get a layout of the room…” The layout in question appeared, holographically
projected, from a droid hovering in front of Chariot at about chest level. She poked her finger through it a couple of times. “And tap all of these dots…”

“The speakers, yes.” Croix smiled. “And now you can get your voice projected throughout the whole room!”

A pause. “Croix, I already know how to project my voice. I’m a performer.”

“Well, yes, but—but everyone has off days!” Croix snorted, crossed her arms, whirled around—but it was easy enough to see she was only pretending to be annoyed. “Fine, don’t use it. See if I ever do anything nice for you again.”

Chariot snorted. “It’s great, Croix, just a little bit overengineered. Thank you.”

Croix smiled. Then her projection winked out of existence, and the droid she’d been riding flew out the door. With that, Chariot turned her attention to the class and said, “Well, let’s get started!” The words were projected from speakers at the upper corners of the room.

Mani sighed, and got into the groove of class.

Magic Astronomy had emerged as her favorite class—or maybe her least unfavorite?—since despite the name there was very nearly no magic involved. Yes, it was related to magic: they tracked how the movements of stars and planets affected various magical phenomena, similar to tracking the tides by the moon, and practiced some vague, minor divination. However, actual spellcasting almost never happened during the class. So for fifty-ish blessed minutes a day, she could just sit in a chair, and take notes, and fill out worksheets, and answer questions, and almost nothing would blow up.

Almost.

“All right,” Chariot said, as the end of class approached. “And now for a quick demonstration of the tracking we’re talking about… Mani, could you come down?”

Mani stiffened. Demonstration was her least favorite word in the English language at this moment in time. Next to her, Tiff gave her an encouraging look, and what she probably thought was a helpful shove. “Good luck!” she whispered.

Cringing internally, and probably externally as well, Mani made her way down to the front of the room. “Just follow my lead,” Chariot said, and her smiling expression actually helped to calm Mani down a bit. “It’s nothing too hard. The gist of it is that you lift up your wand like so—” she raised her own above her hand, and Mani mirrored the gesture “—and you cast a spell to project the stars above you, as they would appear if it were night time right now. The spell is Nichta Fantastiki.”

Mani gulped. “Nichta….” It was just a simple projection spell, right? No way she could screw this up, right? Right? “Nichta Fantasti—”

“Hey.”


Mani nodded. She looked skyward. “Nichta Fantastiki,” she said, her voice steady.
She focused, very hard, as the lights appeared on the ceiling. She’d done enough spells at Luna Nova, for better or for worse (all right, to be honest, just for worse), that she was able to visualize the magic leaving her. She tried to imagine it like a steady stream of water leaving a bathroom faucet, which was tough because it was usually more like Niagara Falls, but she gritted her teeth and clamped down on the output through sheer force of will.

“Great job!” Chariot said, and the words would have sounded patronizing if they hadn’t been so entirely and clearly sincere. “Everyone else, can you identify what constellation is above her head right now?”

Mani couldn’t identify any of the constellations. She lost track of what Chariot was saying, or what the responses from the class were: all her attention was focused inward. Keep it together, keep it together, don’t let it all out at once and just keep it together—

“Mani? Mani!” A light tap on her shoulder grabbed her attention, and she saw Chariot smiling at her again. “That’s all for now. You can stop.”

Mani gasped, like she was surfacing from deep water, and dropped her wand—it was the quickest and easiest way to stop her magic. Chariot clapped her hands. “All right, everyone, that’s the class! Homework is the even numbered problems for chapter five in the textbook, and if you have any questions, my office door is always open!”

The other students gathered their various bags and filed out of the classroom. “I knew you could do it,” Tiff said as she walked past Mani, and Char gave a friendly thumbs up. For her part, Mani panted for a few more seconds before smiling, picking up her wand, and skipping her way back to her table to grab her things. She’d gone up in front of the whole class, and held a spell for what felt like a whole minute, and she hadn’t screwed up at all!

And then she glanced at the ceiling again, just as she was walking out the door. It had been spotless at the start of class, but now, in every single place where she’d projected a star, there was a burn mark.

Her bag slid off her shoulder. She ran back to the other side of the room, shoved open a window, and yelled, “Pharus, pharus, pharus!”

Three massive explosions sounded out from the sky, in roughly the direction where she’d been pointing. She panted heavily, leaning on the windowsill, and then let out a throaty cry and threw her wand to the floor. The blasts were still ringing in her ears ten seconds after she’d fired them.

“It’s really not a big deal,” Chariot said from behind her, and Mani jumped—she’d completely forgotten the teacher was still in the room. She continued, her voice apologetic for some reason: “I’ll just call one of the fairies to clean it off—it’s what they’re paid for, and they can fly—”

“That’s not the problem!” Mani sucked in huge breaths between gritted teeth, as her gut churned. “It’s just—I’m just—” She pounded both fists on the sill and looked around. “Why can’t I do this!?”

Chariot watched her for a moment, not saying anything. Giving her a chance to catch her breath, to calm down.

“Why can’t I do what I’m trying to do? How long am I going to be a screw-up!?” She took deep, heaving breaths, feeling her lungs straining against her ribs, until she was finally approaching calm. The cool October air outside, and the slight wind on her face, helped with that.
Allah above. At this rate, she was really going to have to do it, wasn’t she? She was really going to have to…

Chariot walked over beside her. “Mind if I join you?” she asked: Mani grunted, but moved over.
“Thanks. If it’s any consolation, I know you’ve been working really hard on this, and you’re definitely making progress. Akko’s mentioned you’ve been letting her tutor you with her MOP program.” She paused. “Magic Outreach Program program. Aha. But she says you’re really improving.”

Oh, of course. Akko. Mani tried not to let her annoyance show, and said, “And what would she know about it?”

“What would Akko Kagari know about a first year witch struggling with magic?” Chariot’s smile looked nostalgic. “I’d say she would know a fair amount. She also knew to tell me how you shot down a cockatrice once, and saved a girl’s life in Blytonbury.”

Mani felt her cheeks redden, and she had to look away. “Anyone could have done that,” she muttered. “I just got pointed in the right direction.”

“Mm? I wonder.”

The two of them stared out the window. It was quite a nice sight, if a little sad. Such leaves as existed in the Forest of Arcturus were fully orange and starting to fall, and all the less dangerous plant life was also showing signs of the season: flowers were drooping, grass was yellowing. All this lay under a blue sky with few clouds to block it, but which couldn’t let as much warmth in as it had even a month ago.

“It’s funny, isn’t it?” Chariot said. Mani looked at her as she continued, “Funny how the mind works. You can have accomplishments, you can look at them and know that they’re definitely real things—and then the mind can tell you that no, they don’t count. Because they weren’t big enough, because someone else could have done it better. Because some corresponding mistake was more recent, or more important, or more embarrassing. And if you can’t think of any mistakes, then your mind is happy enough to conjure up future failures. Just to make sure you can’t win.”

Mani shuddered. The words were… painfully descriptive, like a dart had struck a bullseye in her brain. “It’s not funny at all,” she mumbled.

Chariot smiled. “No. It really isn’t.” Then she turned to face Mani directly. “If there’s anything you want to tell me, then let me know. I’ve got my next class in a little bit, but you can stay until then—”

“I’ve been thinking about dropping out of Luna Nova.”

Chariot’s eyes widened for a moment, and Mani felt a perverse pleasure in managing to damage her composure by even that much. “Okay,” Chariot said. “Because you haven’t been making progress?”

She sucked in a breath, and turned fully to face Professor Chariot. Now that she’d said the big thing, the rest of her words came easily, as if the gutter of thought had just been unclogged. “I know you told me you used to be bad at magic, like me. I know you’re really good at it now. But… I’m not like you. You had a whole traveling show about how much you loved magic, but magic isn’t my dream—it’s just my problem.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out the nullitite stone. “If I can just… just pour magic into this thing a couple of times a day, like daily prayers? If I can just manage it and not have to worry about it, then… maybe that would be
She bent down to pick up her wand again, if only so she could tap it against her stone in a quickening staccato. “I mean… you want me to master magic. Akko wants me to master magic. My friends want me to master magic, my family wants me to master magic… but I don’t know what I want.” Her shoulders slumped. “Except I know I don’t want to hurt myself, or anyone else, with this awful stupid thing inside me. I can’t let that happen again.”

With one final smack of wand against stone, she managed to stop her fidgeting hands, and looked back up at Chariot. “So now I guess you’re going to try to convince me to stay?”

Professor Chariot closed her eyes, and took a breath in, and breathed out. “What I’m going to do is, I’m going to ask you to wait,” she said, opening her eyes again. “Wait a week. Really make sure you know what you want to do. And if you want to drop out a week from now, and that’s what you tell me… I’ll guide you through the process.” She sighed. “I might not be happy about it. But I will help you.”

“Thanks.” Mani nodded, not sure what else to do. Then she turned away from the door, picked up the bag she’d dropped, and walked out of the classroom.

“Mani,” Chariot said after her.

She stopped and looked around through the door. “Just one thing I’d like to say,” Chariot said. “That thing inside you isn’t stupid, and it’s not awful. It’s just you.”

“Tia Freyre,” Ximena said, holding her broom out in front of her rather than sitting on it. It jerked upward in her hands, coming to life in the sudden way brooms did. She peered at it critically, then raised it above her head and declared, “Tia Securae.”

The broom locked into place, staying still in midair. Ximena let go with one hand and almost let go with the other, leaving only an index finger touching it, but it didn’t even waver. She nodded, then grabbed it with both hands palms-down and a shoulder width apart—Ximena’s shoulder width, which was pretty broad—and started doing pullups. “One,” she counted under her breath, “two, three, four….”

“Okay,” Rain said, sitting on the grass near Ximena, “credit where credit’s due, that’s actually pretty cool.” She turned to face Alice. “What if we did that for our project, dude?”

Alice hadn’t been paying a ton of attention, just sitting outside on the cool grass with the rest of her friends. It took her a few moments for her brain to reel back the conversation. “What?” Once she did, she turned to face Rain. “I guess, maybe, but it’s not really very... ambitious?”

“I don’t know—about ambitious,” Ximena said, her words metered out as she pulled herself up, then down, then up again. “But I didn’t—invent this spell—myself. My—parents—taught me.”

“Yeah, see?” Alice shrugged. “Wouldn’t even work.”

“Hmm.”
The sun was nearly down, and given the cloud cover it was already pretty dark on Luna Nova’s
grounds. But Alice had a strategy for that: she’d cast a little spell of her own devising, one which
set an ethereal tent shimmering around them to protect from any wind. A blue flame burned near
the apex of the tent, providing warmth and a little extra light.

Rain pointed at the flame. “Did you invent the spell to do that?”

Alice blushed and looked away. “A little.”

“No, that’s not… it’s not anything special. I doodled that spell in a notebook years ago.”

“Then what about that thing you did with your poncho this morning?” Rain scooched closer on the
grass. “That was new, right?”

“That’s even less special.” Alice was hiding her face behind a hand now. “It’s literally just an
airbag.”

“Oh my god, dude, stop self-deprecating before your chi goes rancid.” Rain grimaced, wafting air
away from her nose with a hand. “It’s better than what anyone else is gonna come up with. Just use
the tent or the poncho or something.”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“But what? All right, wise guy, what do you wanna do?”

“I don’t know!” Alice let out a long, low groan and lay back, her head leaning against the back
wheel of her scooter. It was important to have her head up, because she currently had about a half a
dozen of Rain’s needles in her back, giving her a little extra boost. She’d rather not have the ground
plunge them all the way in. “All I know is, it’s gotta be big.”

“Fifty eight, fifty nine, sixty.” Ximena let go of the broom with a sigh of relief. As the broom lost
contact with her body, it fell out of the air and clattered on the wet grass. “For what it’s worth,” she
said, turning around to sit next to them, “I can certainly sympathize with a desire to excel at our
classwork, and not just do the bare minimum. We’re at the most prestigious magical academy in
the world!” She spread her arms wide, indicating Luna Nova. “Shouldn’t we bring our best?”

Rain yawned. “Whatever, dude. Modern schooling is a conspiracy designed to indoctrinate students
into the capitalist hive mind.”

Ximena’s eyes narrowed. “You say those words and I’m not convinced you know what they
actually mean.”

“They mean that we just gotta do okay on this project. We don’t gotta, like, become the best
witches ever or anything like that.”

“And what if I want to?” Alice said.

The other two turned to face her. She forced herself to sit upright with a grunt. “What if I want to
become the best witch ever?” she said, looking at each of them in turn. “What if I want to blow
everyone away with what we do in this project—everyone who ever thought I couldn’t? We
couldn’t?” she amended.

Rain pursed her lips. “This is going back to the people thinking you’re lazy thing?”
“Not everything I do is because I’m disabled, Rain.” Alice sighed. “But… look, when I was a peppy little kid, I made a promise to myself. I was gonna become the greatest witch of all time. And then that didn’t seem like so much of a possibility for a while.” She leaned forward, placing her arms on the other two’s shoulders. “But now, thanks to my very good friends, I’ve got another shot, and like hell am I gonna throw it away.”

She pushed herself to her feet, using the two of her friends as support. “And that doesn’t mean making a magic tent, or a cool poncho, or anything that any old loser could come up with. It means going big!” Her fist clenched. “It means making something no one else, not even a teacher, could figure out how to do! It means coming up with something that no one else in the world would even dare try! It means—”

She stopped. Out across the grounds, barely visible in the faint ambient light of evening, something had caught her eye. Her mind’s eye.

“Alice?” Ximena said, as Alice reached back behind herself and pulled her scooter forward. Then she leaned onto it and started moving, outside the protective enclave of the tent, forward to the forest. “Alice, what are you—hey!” Because Alice had just tapped her scooter, and muttered, “Mutati converso Freyre!” Underneath her, the scooter transformed and reconfigured itself into a red, steel broom, and the knee pad became her seat. It was already flying—hence the Freyre part of her spell—and so she took off, urging herself upward and onward.

“What are you doing? The forest’s dangerous!” Ximena yelled from behind her.

Her scooter didn’t make a great broom, she knew. The conversion magic created something that worked for, at best, twenty minutes. But she didn’t need very long at all.

Because she knew exactly where she was going. Being a witch meant being able to sense magic in the air, even if only just a little: it meant letting that magic into your body, letting it become part of you. So all Alice had to do was point herself in the direction where the magic was getting the strongest, as if flying into a warm front, and fly.

She flew over the forest, which was nice enough to stay mostly quiet as she went. True, at one point a mandrake uncurled itself from the trees below, easily fifty feet tall, opening its maw and letting its juices drip down as it lunged at her—but Alice blasted it with an Arctica Maxima, quite literally freezing it in place from tip to root. She flew past it without a second glance, and heard it shatter under its own weight behind her.

So, on the whole, a quiet ride. But it was hard going as she kept flying, and not just because flying was always tough for her. The magic radiating against her body was almost painful, and it only got stronger as she approached her goal. She gritted her teeth and wiped her brow.

And then, finally, a clearing unlike anywhere else in the forest. The rest of Arcturus was full of dead, decaying, broken gray trees—full of monsters, and brambles, and death. But this place was beauty incarnate. Lush grass carpeted the ground as if this were the end of spring, and not the middle of autumn. Flowers bloomed amid ancient, time-weathered stone sculptures. Near the center, a great tree stood, with a stately balcony adorning the top.

But it wasn’t at the center. The center itself was where Alice touched down and dismounted, panting for breath with her hands on her knees at even this short exertion.

It only took a few more seconds before a cry reached her ears from behind: “Are you crazy?” She
looked around and saw Rain and Ximena, sharing Ximena’s broom, diving down to land beside her.

Ximena dismounted first, and stomped toward Alice with a special protective kind of murder in her eyes. “This is Arcturus Forest! This place eats witches like us!” She grabbed Alice’s shoulders firmly. “Are you hurt? No? Good. We need to get out of—”

Alice jabbed down at the ground.

Ximena threw her hands up. “What? What’s so special about this spot that you needed to….?” And then she looked down, and stopped talking for a few seconds. Then she said, in a voice no louder than a whisper, “This is…. ”

Alice completed the sentence for her: “The Grand Triskelion.” It was a massive golden circle, wider than a house, and in the center was a four-pointed star. In the center of that was the triskelion design itself: three hands reaching past one another, surrounded by three magical swirls. In the center of that stood Alice, Rain, and Ximena.

Rain looked down at the Triskelion. Then she looked up at Alice. Then, apparently just to be sure, she looked down and back up again. Then her jaw popped open. “No,” she said. “No, you had better not be thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

Alice cocked her head to the side, smiling. “And what do you think I’m thinking?”

“Unlocking the power of the Grand Triskelion. For a school project.” Rain held out her hands. “You saw it on the news, right? That Akko girl we bailed out of jail, she already unlocked it or something. That’s why magic’s back. Like, dude, forget how crazy this idea is in the first place, you can’t re-unlock something that’s already unlocked.”

“Oh. Oh!” Alice laughed at that. She really, really laughed. “Is that all you thought I had planned?”

Library time was the best time.

Tiffany sat at a table. A stack of books was in front of her. A little snack, small enough that the librarian couldn’t object to it, was at her side.

She was in her element.

“What’shca doing?” Char asked, sitting down at the other side of the table. Predictably, she leaned her feet up on the table, but there was enough space that Tiff could work with that. “Head start on homework?”

“Yes and no.” Tiff smiled. “I’m getting an early start on the project, to be particular. If we’re devising new magic, then I want to create something truly special!”

Char shrugged. “Kay. I bet no one else is trying this hard on the project.”

Tiff frowned. “I can think of one person who definitely will be.”

“Aight. So, you decided to learn how to create new magic…. ” She squinted, and looked at the pile
of books Tiff had gathered. “By reading a bunch of really old stuff about *old* magic?”

“Aha!” Tiff raised a finger, a little smile on her face, and rotated the books so that their spines faced Char. “These aren’t just any old books, Char. These are all the books I could find about the creation of new magic! They’re precisely the correct reference materials to use!”

Char looked unconvinced as she leaned in. “That’s like six books. This library is huge.”

“Well, yeah.” Tiff had to sigh and slump forward at that. She’d spent well over an hour combing this veritable Alexandria, and the lack of sources hurt her soul. “I can safely say that, historically, this school hasn’t prioritized innovation in magic.”

“This is all really old stuff about the Nine Olde Witches,” Char continued, as if she hadn’t really been listening to Tiffany at all. “That’s really the newest magic you can find?”

“Don’t knock it!” Tiff slapped a hand on the top of the pile. “The Nine Olde Witches did for magic what Shakespeare did for English—more so. Did you know that those nine people were responsible for creating as much as *fifty percent* of known spells, even to this day? If anyone knows how creating new magic works, it’s them.”

“Yeah, but that’s all *old* magic now.” Char yawned. “ Seems you’ve got the wrong idea.”

Tiff glowered at her. “If you’re going to complain, why not actually *help* instead? It’s your project too.”

“That sounds like a lot of work… nah, no thanks.”

Tiff groaned.

“Honestly, I just came here to chat with you. Can’t chat with Mani right now because she’s doing tutoring with big sis, and… well,” Char said, grimacing, “I don’t wanna distract Mani while she’s trying not to blow stuff up.”

“Then why don’t you go do homework or something? We both know you have a backlog.”

“Eh, nah. Maybe I’ll just go back and sleep.” With a little smile, Char pushed herself backward and let her chair topple. She grunted as her back hit the ground, then picked herself up. “Can’t get enough sleep, am I right?”

“Apparently you can’t….” Tiff sighed, looking her friend in the eyes. “You know, I really worry about you sometimes, Char.”

“ Eh, don’t. I’m fine.” With a flap of her hand, Char turned around and ambled away.

Tiff sighed, and got back to her work.

“Typical.”

That was Scarlette’s voice. Tiff didn’t look up, but judging by the sound, Scarlette was probably leaning over the table where Char had been. “She didn’t even pick the chair back up,” she said. “Of *course* she wouldn’t want to help you work—she’s nothing but a layabout!”

“Scarlette,” Tiff chided. “Char is a good witch, and a great friend.” A pause. “Though I will admit that not all of her qualities are great.” Another pause. “Or particularly good.” She restrained herself for a second more before looking up, leaning forward and hissing, “Did you know she doesn’t even
ride a broom? She rides two brooms with a hammock between them! She calls it her broomock!"

“I know!” Scarlette was sitting across from her—she must have used the Shooting Star to lever the chair back up—and leaning toward her with the same mirth on her face as Tiff felt on her own. “And what’s with how she walks around? It’s like a glacier turned into a girl!”

They both giggled, albeit quietly because this was still a library.

“Do you remember,” Tiff said, and then she looked around to make sure no one was close before continuing in a whisper: “The time we were in this library chasing that ghost? The reason I was doing that was because I was in detention. The reason I was in detention was because I was late to class—because I was making sure Char was on time to her classes!”

“Wow!” Scarlette smiled widely. “Tiffany, you are a saint. You try and try to help her, even when she doesn’t put in any effort whatsoever.”

Tiff chuckled, feeling her cheeks heat up. “Oh, well, I’m just doing the best I can. But enough flattery, I need to get back to…. She glanced at her books—most of them about the Olde Witches—and then she glanced back at the real life, actual genuine article, Olde Witches sitting across from her. “Scarlette!” she exclaimed, forgetting for a moment about volume restrictions. “You’ve created magic on your own, right?”

Scarlette snorted. “Of course! It’s one of my best skills!”

“Well, what’s your secret? How do you do it?”

“It’s easy! I just—”

Her projection vanished, as suddenly as a TV being unplugged. The Shooting Star, which had been behind her, fell to the floor.

Tiff stared. “Scarlette?” she said. When no answer was forthcoming, she stood quickly and hurried around the table. “Scarlette?”

The Shooting Star flopped from side to side on the ground, like a dying fish. After a few seconds, a red flicker appeared, and then disappeared just as quickly—and then again, and again. The fourth time, the flicker stabilized into Scarlette, bent over on her knees, head clutched in her hands. “My head,” she gasped. “My head, my head, my head.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Scarlette was heaving deep breaths—did she even need to breathe?—and trembling where she knelt. Tiff bent down and put a hand on her shoulder, and at length the tremors stilled. “I think,” Scarlette finally said, her voice shaky, “I tried to view a memory that I don’t have.”

“A memory you don’t have…. ” Tiff’s eyes widened. “Like, a memory stored in one of your missing pieces?”

“Could be.” Scarlette let her hands drop from her head. “I can’t be sure, but yes, I think that’s it.”

Tiff put out a hand, letting Scarlette take it and get back on her feet. “How many are left?”

“I don’t know.” Scarlette screwed up her face. “I feel… one third complete. So, six? It could be six.”
“Six pieces.” Tiff sighed. “If you’re right, then that’s two down, four to go. Four pieces that could be anywhere in the world.”

“Oh, whatever.” Scarlette offered her a weak smile. “Don’t you fret about my problems. I’m just sad that I can’t help you with your project. Go on, show those other two the way a real witch crafts spells.”

Tiff grimaced. “All right, if you’re sure…..” She rounded the table once more and sat down heavily in her seat. This couldn’t be too hard, right? Sure, Scarlette couldn’t help her directly, but if an Olde Witch had confidence in her, that meant she had this easily, right?

Right?

“What is up, fearless leader?” Char called, raising a hand from where she lay as Tiff trudged back into the room. Scarlette followed just behind her.

It had been three hours. Tiff had only left the library because she’d been kicked out, and in all that time, she hadn’t come up with a single idea. So, Tiff did not dignify Char’s question with a response—or, at least, not a dignified response. “Gnnnrrf,” she said.

“That bad, huh.” Char reached out to a bedside table and took a long draught of water from her glass.

Mani, who seemed to be finishing up her prayers, sat up. “Did you come up with an idea?” she said. She was flecked all over with soot. Tiff decided not to ask. After a few seconds, Mani’s face fell: “Oh, I guess not. But you have plenty of time still!”

Beside her, Scarlette walked over and placed the Shooting Star in its usual corner, then waved before her projection vanished.

“What’s Spin the Bottle?” Mani asked.

Tiff kept walking as Char answered: “Oh, it’s this thing you do with your friends where you all sit in a circle and whoever’s going spins the bottle, and whoever the bottle is pointing at has to do a thing.”

“Sometimes it’s truth or dare. Sometimes you have to take the person and pash em.” Char smiled. “And for those of you from the Northern Hemisphere, that means make out with them.”
“This is Truth or Dare,” Tiff said, trying to control her blush. “Not that it matters, since it got lost in the mail for a month, and now I’m clearly not going to get the chance to play it.” She yanked open the room’s only closet, stowed the box on a shelf, and slammed the door shut. With that mission accomplished, she yanked back up to her bed and rolled beneath the covers. “Good night,” she said, jabbing her wand at the room’s light to turn it off.

Everything was quiet. The room was lit only by the moon through the window, and the only sounds were Tiffany’s breathing, and the breathing of her two classmates. This high above the ground, not even the faint sounds of insects filtered through from outside. Perfectly peaceful.

Tiffany spent about five minutes with her eyes closed before angrily tossing herself over on her side. Then, another five minutes later, she was on her other side. Neither way seemed to help her sleep.

“Yo, Tiff,” Char whispered from below. “You awake?”

Tiff didn’t respond at all this time.

“I can hear you up there. You’re keeping me up. Difficult feat, I know.”

“Gnnrrrf.”

“So, question.” Tiff heard shifting from beneath her, and gave up on trying to sleep for the moment: she leaned down over her ladder to see Char looking back up. “Why can’t you play the Truth or Dare game? What’s the big deal?”

Tiff sighed, and slumped forward, and didn’t answer for about half a minute. At the end of that half-minute, Char was still looking up at her, so Tiff flopped back onto her bed. “Look, I guess I could. It’s not physically impossible. But… I got that game to play with Alice.”

“Ohh.”

“I bet it sounds pretty stupid, but….” Tiff rubbed at her eyes. “Ugh, I had this plan, you know? I was gonna be in the same dorm room as Alice, and we were going to do all sorts of ‘first time away from home’ dorm stuff. Sneak out at night, stay up late talking… spin the bottle, I guess. It was this whole big idea, and then it just… fell apart.”

Char didn’t respond for a while. “So your idea was to play spin the bottle with exactly two people.”

“Oh, shut up.” Tiff let out a long breath through her nose. “Presumably we would have had a third roommate to play with.”

“No, I just—” Char yawned, long and loud. “Okay, actually. Mani? You up?”

“Yes?”

“Cool. We’re doing this.”

The light turned back on. Tiff winced as it assaulted her eyes, and she raised an arm to shield herself. When she’d adjusted to the light, she saw that Char was out of bed and opening the closet. “Mani, budge over,” she said, pulling the box out and dropping it on Mani’s bed just as Mani yanked her legs out of the way. “Tiff, get down here.”

“Wha….”
Char rolled her eyes, looking back up at her. “Come on, you wanna play this or not?”

Tiff looked down for a few more seconds, before her face broke out in a smile and she hurried down.

The three of them knelt on Mani’s bed, which was big enough for them and the game. Char pulled the lid off the box, tossed it to the floor, and started deconstructing its contents—and with every piece she removed, her expression grew more and more dubious. “A manual?” she asked, holding up the leaflet.

Tiff shrugged. “Every game needs an instruction manual.”

“Nnnnot this one. And… are these truth cards?” Char pulled out two color-coded decks, red and blue. “And dare cards?”

“Well, yes—”

“Oh, here’s the bottle!” Mani smiled as she pulled out the plastic piece, and then frowned. “It’s… not a real bottle?”

“Of course it’s a real bottle—”

“Real bottles have a hole on the end, Tiffany,” Mani said solemnly.

Char, meanwhile, had picked up the leaflet to scan through it, and didn’t seem to like what she was finding. “There’s a point system?”

Tiff threw up her hands. “Well, sorry if I wanted to make sure I was playing it right!”

Char and Mani both looked at her. Then, at almost precisely the same moment, they broke out into giggles. “Wow,” Char said, putting everything back into the box. “It’s like, like, it’s a visual metaphor for you. We don’t need all this crap, trust me.”

With everything packed back up, Char took the box and dropped it over the side of the bed. Then she reached back behind her, to her bedside table, and got her glass of water. She drained it in one long drink, shook out the last few drops over the floor, and then slapped it down on the middle of the bed. “Literally the only thing we need. Come on,” she said, pushing it toward Tiff, “you spin first.”

“But this isn’t how it’s supposed to—”

Char slapped the bed, cutting her off. “Didn’t you say you were gonna sneak out at night with Alice? Were you gonna follow a rulebook on how to break the rules? Come on, live a little.”

Tiff took the glass and spun it. Mani’s comforter was nice and slippery, so it revolved a fair few times before stopping to point at Mani. “All right, Mani,” Tiff said. “Truth or dare?”

Mani hesitated for several seconds, until Char explained: “Truth means you’ve gotta answer one of Tiff’s questions, and you can’t lie. Dare means you’ve gotta do whatever she dares you to do.”

“Whatever she dares me to do?” Mani grimaced. “Truth, please!”

“All right! What is….” Tiff frowned. Mani looked so timid right now, and while she knew that the nominal point of games like this was to push each other to say or do embarrassing things…. “Um… what is your favorite color?”
“Oh!” Relief flooded Mani’s face. “Brown, but not like… pure brown. Reddish brown. I don’t know the English word….”

Char raised a finger. “Chestnut?”

“Yes! Chestnut! I think.”

“Sweet. So now since you were the last person to go,” Char said, “you get to spin it this time.”

Mani did, and so enthusiastically that it spun for twice as long as Tiff’s had. At length, it came to a halt with its mouth pointed roughly in Char’s direction. “All right!” Mani said. “Char! Truth or dare!”

“Dare.”

“I dare you to give me a high five!”

Char squinted at Mani, who had her hand held out. “Seriously?”

“You have to accept the dare! That’s what you said!”

“Yeah, that is not the problem here, you know….” She dutifully raised her hand to high-five Mani’s, shaking her head sadly. “You two suck at this.”

Tiff rolled her eyes. “Well, I guess you’ll show us how it’s done?”

“Gladly.” And with an evil smile that made Tiff worried, Char spun the bottle. Barely. It completed a single lazy revolution before pointing dead at Tiffany. “All right, Tiff,” Char said, leaning forward. “Truth… or dare?”

“Definitely truth.”

“Do you have a crush on anyone at Luna Nova?” And Tiffany’s cheeks went so red she could probably have lit a cigarette on them.

“Char!” Mani hissed, jostling her shoulder a little. “That’s embarrassing!”

“Yeah, that’s the point.”

“Wait, really?”

Char rolled her eyes. “Tiff, answer the question. And no lying, remember? You know the rules.”

“Well, of course I know the rules—and I have to disappoint you because the answer is nnnn…” Tiff tried to complete the word ‘no’, and then a certain gray-skinned, shapely witch came up in her mind’s eye. “Nnnnnnnyes,” she admitted, her head drooping. Well, at least she hadn’t had to say who it was.

“Sweet. Next round I am definitely asking you who it is.” Char grinned. “Well, you’re up.”

Tiff growled, grabbed the bottle, and spun it hard. It stopped on Char. “Truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

“Do you have a crush on anyone at Luna Nova?”
“Nope.” Char winked, took the bottle, and spun it. “Mani, truth or dare.”

“Uh… truth?”

And things continued like that for a while. Char admitted that she’d once lost a tooth after falling asleep on her broom and sliding off; that she’d been in a gifted and talented program at her old school before Luna Nova; and that if she had to pick a dream job, it would be psychiatrist. Tiff had also dared her to do thirty jumping jacks in a row, and Char had completed it—but looked as worn out at the end as if she’d just run a mile. That got Tiff to grin.

Mani’s favorite food was the makroudh, or at least it had been until she ate so many at a party that she threw up, and then she didn’t like them anymore. She knew how to pick a lock, and after that truth had come out, Char had dared her at the next opportunity to demonstrate—and it took her about two minutes, but she pulled it off in the end to general acclaim. She lived with her whole huge family, and she had never learned to swim.

Tiff, on the other hand, wasn’t taking any chances: every time Char had pointed the bottle at her, she’d chosen dare. Char seemed determined to make her regret this, because so far she had been forced to lick a bar of soap, shoot a Smelling Salts spell right into her nose, and open the window to yell to the world that she was ‘Luna Nova’s biggest dweeb’. Honestly, who even used the word dweeb these days? At least Mani had been a little merciful: Mani had only forced her to confess that her favorite band was Fleetwood Mac.

Now it was Mani’s turn again, and she spun the bottle (well, it was technically a glass, but whatever) to land on Tiff. “Truth or dare?”

“Truth.” Tiff sniffed, and wiped her eyes (they were still a bit moist after the Smelling Salts spell).

“Who in the world do you look up to the most?”

“Wow,” Char said, leaning back against Mani’s headboard, “total waste of a spin there.”

Tiff raised an eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

“Well, it’s obviously Akko, right?”

“Pff—what?” Tiff let out a strangled laugh, and she wasn’t sure if it was from mirth or exasperation. “No, it’s not Akko! Are you kidding me? She’s, y’know—”

“The international savior of magic, and also your ass? Former rider of your fave broom?”

“A complete spaz who doesn’t seem to have any decent understanding of magic, and half the time you physically can’t look up to her anyway because she’s decided she wants to be a mouse.” Tiff snorted. “Puh-lease.”

“I dunno, I think she’s pretty cool,” Char said. She turned her head to face Mani. “Back me up on this, Mani. She’s cool, right?”

“Ehhhh…” Mani grimaced in a squeamish kind of way. “You know what? How about we just let Tiff answer the question I asked?”

“Ugh, fine. Who is it?”

Tiff smiled. No, she didn’t smile: she beamed. “My mother.”
“Oh?” Mani leaned forward.

“Victoria Vandergard. Head of the Vandergard family, and she’s a board member on like a dozen companies and she runs a ton of charities—I think she’s on Susan G Komen somewhere!” Tiff smiled, remembering a Race for the Cure they’d spent together. “And she’s, like, the best witch I’ve ever seen. You think Shiny Chariot is ‘all that’?” She shook her head. “Trust me, my mother could totally take her in a fight.”

Char snorted, shaking her head. “You sound a little biased there, mate.”

“I should hope I sound biased! She’s my mother! In fact…. Tiff leaned forward, grabbing a tress of her white bangs and holding it out for inspection. “This isn’t actually my natural color. My mother’s got really pretty white hair, but I got more of a blonde from my dad, but I liked my mother’s so much, so one day I decided I wanted to dye it like hers and… I never stopped.”

She giggled: she felt all bubbly inside. This was what she’d been looking for from the game. “I’ve never told anyone that before. I’ve never really had anyone to tell. But, well, she’s who I want to be when I grow up.”

After a few seconds, some of her enthusiasm died away. Char and Mani were both looking at her, and she wasn’t sure what to make of their expressions. “What? Is it not cool to love your mother?”

“What? Nah.” Char shrugged and looked away. “It’s super cool that you like her so much. That’s… great.”

“Yes. Yes it is.” And without further ado, Tiff reached out for the bottle—

A red shaft stabbed down at the bed, cutting off her hand’s approach, and Tiff looked up to see Scarlette looking down at the bottle with shining eyes. “Hey, this looks fun! I wanna try!” She was holding the Shooting Star with both hands.

Char frowned. “Is your broom trying to get in on this?”

“I have a name—and yes! That’s what I said!”

Tiff squinted at her. “Scarlette, you know they can’t hear you, right?”

“And how is that my problem?” Scarlette placed the point of the Shooting Star against the bottle, and then spun it as hard as she could. Considering how quickly the Shooting Star could move, Tiff wasn’t surprised to see the bottle rotating so quickly it blurred.

Char looked from side to side, and then looked up at a vague spot in the air. “Look, mate,” she said, and Tiff realized that she was trying to look at where Scarlette’s face was. “You seem nice, I think, but I literally have no idea what you’re saying or doing. This is not really ideal for Truth or Dare.”

“Oh, to the devil with you!” Scarlette was standing on the bed, looking down at Char with her hands on her hips. After a moment, she looked down at Tiff. “Tiffany, please tell her I said ‘to the devil with you’. ”

“I am not telling her that.”

“Telling me what?”

Finally the bottle was slowing down, and all eyes followed it as it decelerated. After ten seconds
more, it came to a halt, and the end was pointing at Mani. “Moor girl!” Scarlette said, pointing the Star at her. “Just where were you on the day of magic’s reawakening?”

Tiff grabbed the Star and pushed it down. “Okay, first of all, she has a name and it’s Mani—well, technically, it’s Imani, but she also has a nickname and that’s Mani. Second of all, it was my turn to spin the bottle, thank you very much.”

Scarlette glared down at her. “Betrayal.”

Tiff snorted. “OK, in fairness, that actually was a pretty good question,” she said. “But, third of all, you’re supposed to say truth or dare first, so….” She looked at Mani and asked, “Truth or dare?”

“Uh… truth, I guess?”

“All right. Where were you on Starfall?”

Scarlette beamed.

“Oh!” Mani didn’t beam. “Um… in the hospital.”

Char blinked and leaned forward. “What? Why?”

“Char,” Tiff said, leaning over to poke her in the shoulder, “there’s no rule saying anyone has to answer followup questions. I can show you the manual if you need me to—”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Mani said, waving her hands in front of her body. “It’s a bit of a long story, though. You see…” She paused. “How do I tell this… have you ever heard of Zakat?”

Char shrugged. Scarlette clearly had no idea. Tiff, on the other hand, screwed up her face: this sounded vaguely familiar from some half-forgotten history class. “Something about… Islam, right? It’s a pillar of Islam related to charity?”

“Basically. It’s something every Muslim has to do: give money to the needy. The more you have, the more you give. It’s like….” Mani frowned, apparently searching for the words to express herself. “It’s like… it’s like a kind of justice. Those who have, have to help those who have not. But I don’t exactly have any money of my own, you know?” She shrugged. “So… wow, you’re not going to believe me when I say this….”

“Believe you when you say what?” Tiff asked.

“Once a month, I’d sneak out of my house.”

After a pause, Char leaned over and jostled Mani’s shoulder. “Get out. You snuck out of the house?”

“That makes it sound like such a big deal!” Mani’s face was turning red. “My bedroom was only a few floors up. I just… felt like I had to do something, but with my family I never felt like I had time. So I’d sneak out and I’d go to, I dunno what you’d call it, a place where you give food for free?”

“Soup kitchen,” Tiff said, nodding. Her gaze was fixed on Mani’s face.

“Well, it wasn’t soup, but sure. Call it a soup kitchen. I was at the soup kitchen, and helping out, and usually it wasn’t really anything that interesting. I’d give out the food and it would make me feel good. But then, one time… one time….”
She trailed off, and looked down at the comforter. “The last time I did that was on Starfall.”

Tiff waited a few seconds. When the explanation didn’t continue, she scooched closer along the bed, and said, “Mani? What happened?”

“Sorry. It was… we were just serving out food when there was this shout in the streets. Everyone ran over to where someone had set up a big television in a window, and there was something about two witches and they were fighting off an evil magical missile. Akko and Diana. It was incredible. We all prayed for their success.” A ghost of a smile manifested on Mani’s lips, but it quickly exorcised itself. “And then the missile blew up, and there were all these beautiful green lights that came down from the sky, like falling stars….”

Tiff remembered that day too—how her mother had found her in the library, and told Tiffany that she really needed to see what was on the news. How she’d run out to the highest balcony in her house, just in time to see a million lights descend upon New Amsterdam. How her mother had gasped and held her hand to her mouth. There couldn’t be a person in the world who didn’t remember it.

“The lights looked like butterflies,” Mani continued, staring at nothing as if she were in a trance. “And one of them flew around me, and I put out my hand for it to land on, and it sort of… it sort of melted into my skin. And I felt this, this rush of energy, and I didn’t know what it meant at the time. After all, I wasn’t a witch back then.”

Tiff blinked. Then her mind started putting some things together. “So that was when you—” She covered her mouth—a mouth that had opened in horror.

“So we still had mouths to feed,” Mani said, speaking faster now. “So after all the light show was done, we got back to work and started feeding people, and everyone was happy and it had been such a nice spectacle, hadn’t it? But I was starting to feel kind of sick. I didn’t want to worry about it—” she shook her head “—because the work was more important, but it kept getting worse and worse, and I think I collapsed because someone was holding me to ask what was wrong, and then….”

She sniffed, and wiped her eyes. “Then I woke up at the hospital. And my family was there, and they told me I’d been found in the remains of a soup kitchen, and that it was a miracle that no one seemed to have died.” She shuddered. “I think no one died. I’m sure no one died. And, um… that was the last time I ever went back to that soup kitchen. And once my family figured out what I had become, they sent me off to Luna Nova.”

Mani looked back up at the rest of them. “And… that’s where I was on Starfall.”

Then it was quiet. Silent, even. Tiff didn’t even hear breathing from the other two, and Char’s face certainly looked as horrified as her own had to. Even Scarlette, who had kneeled down beside Tiffany, seemed troubled.

Char yawned, widely and loudly. “Welllllllllllllpp,” she said through her yawn, popping the P at the end. “I think that’s a pretty good stopping point.”

Mani sniffed. “I’m sorry, I-I just brought the mood down—we can keep going! Here!” With a hasty hand, she grabbed at the bottle and turned it around—not a free spin, a manual turn—to face Char. “Truth or, truth or dare?”

But Char was standing up. “Nah, I’m too tired to talk about myself.” She yawned yet again. “Night, all.” Without further ado she rolled onto her bottom bunk, face-down, and started snoring.
Tiff took a deep breath, then reached out to hold Mani’s shoulder in what she hoped to high heaven was a comforting way. “Mani, I’m… I’m so sorry about what happened to you.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Mani smiled back, but the smile didn’t reach her eyes—it barely reached her mouth. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Something was troubling about that last sentence. Tiff pulled away, and carefully got off Mani’s bed. “Well… good night.” She climbed her own ladder, transitioned onto her own bed, and turned the light off once more with a jab of her wand. “Sleep well.”

No one replied. Tiff opened her mouth wide, letting out a breath that wasn’t quite a yawn, and pulled up her covers.

“So I was right,” Scarlette said.

Tiff looked over to see her smiling. “About what?” Tiff whispered.

“The question that I asked was excellent.”

Tiff sighed, turned to face the other way, and closed her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

So a few things. First of all, I hope you all enjoy this chapter! I worked pretty hard on it.

Second of all, in the time while I was working on this arc, I actually received some art for this story! I forgot to post it last chapter, but now I'm gonna start posting some of it! Starting with:
It's Alice! I commissioned this art from the talented SoggyStyrofoam, and I couldn't be happier with how it turned out. Thanks again, Soggy!
“Oh, gawd,” Alice moaned, before she’d even opened her eyes the next morning. “My everything.”

Taking that flight into the forest yesterday had been a mistake. It had been a worthwhile mistake, certainly, but she was paying for it now—big time. Her muscles felt like she’d run a marathon, then done a million situps and two million pushups. Oh, and just for funsies, everything hurt like hell on top of the exhaustion. It was like a black belt had used her as a punching bag overnight: every freaking muscle felt bruised.

“Alice?” said a voice, which Alice—not being in the best shape of her life right now, though sadly it wasn’t the worst either—took a few seconds to recognize as Ximena. She turned her head to the left, muscles shrieking at her with every degree of rotation, and saw Ximena’s feet hanging down from the top bunk. “Are you all right?” Ximena asked.

“Just peachy,” Alice croaked.

“I’ll be down in a minute.” Movement from above suggested that Ximena was, as usual, making her bed. God only knew how she managed to make her bed with such military precision every day—and on the top bunk, too—but it made Alice glad that she’d got the bottom bunk instead, because if she tried that it would probably kill her.

“Based on your tone of voice,” Ximena continued, grunting with effort as she stretched her sheets, “I’m inferring that you don’t want to exercise this morning.”

“Oh, I want to.” Alice kept her voice low to avoid unnecessary jaw movement. “I’d love to. But it’s not happening. Rain?” she said, daring to raise her voice a little more. “Little help?”

A little more rotation of the neck showed her Rain on the single bed. She was still snoring, her sheets tangled up with her nightdress as she sprawled amid the covers without a care in the world. What a life that would be.

“Rain?” Alice said, wincing as she pushed a little louder. No response.

Ximena sighed, and jumped down from the top bunk to the floor. Her impact on the floor was loud, and Rain jolted at the sound, her eyes snapping open. “Up and at ’em, medic!” Ximena slapped the headboard a couple times as Rain groaned and sat up. “Your patient is waiting!”

“One, dude, I get it.” Rubbing her eyes, Rain slid out of bed and trudged the two feet over to Alice’s side. “Wow, you really burned through your spoons yesterday, huh?”

Alice groaned as Rain put the back of her hand to her forehead. “Is that actual hippie slang or did you just make it up?”

“Uh, third option? Spoons are real, dude. Google it.”

“I know spoons are real. I use them every day. For—” She hissed out in pain as Rain held up her wrist, possibly to take her pulse. “For soup.”

“Nah, I’m talking theoretical spoons.” Rain let Alice’s hand flop back down. “Real theoretical
spoons, though. Anyway, yeah, your chi is super gnarled up. You should probably just chillax for today, get some strength back.”

“No, absolutely not.”

“I’m serious, dude—”

“So am I, dude.” Alice paused a moment. “Dudette. I’m not missing a day because of this stupid disease. Just stick me full of pins, and give me that energy boost—” She gritted her teeth and growled. “I’ll power through.”

“I’m serious, dude. No one’s gonna think you’re a flake just because you need a day off.”

With great effort, Alice balled her hand into a fist, raised it above the mattress, and brought it back down. “I’ll power through! Just help me, okay?”

“All right. You’re the boss.” Rain reached down to the bedside table, pulling open the drawer where she kept her acupuncture needles. “Just turn yourself over.”

A few seconds passed.

“Dude?”

Alice groaned. “Can’t.” A complicated full-body maneuver like that was out of the question for the moment. “Ximmie? Please?”

Ximena shrugged, leaned down, and flipped Alice over in one swift motion. “Thanks,” Alice said into her pillow, feeling Ximena tug her shirt down to expose her back as well.

“You’re welcome,” Ximena said, her voice muffled. “But while we’re offering words of caution….” Here her voice became a little more hesitant, less drill-sergeant-y. “Can we talk about last night?”

Alice groaned again. “Look, if you want to tell me it was a bad idea to go flying into the woods, believe me, I’ve noticed—”

“I mean the project idea.” Ximena’s voice sounded less confident by the moment. In her head, Alice pictured a nervous fidget. “Are you serious about that project idea? You do realize it’s impossible, right?”

“Oh. Oh, that?” Alice snorted. She felt a series of pinches in her back: Rain had to be applying the acupuncture, like every other morning. Even the psychological effect was enough to make her feel like she could take on the world. “I mean, I hope it’s impossible. If it were possible it wouldn’t be any fun.”

A few seconds later, she added: “That was a joke. Of course it’s not literally impossible. Probably. I’ll need to look into it.”

“But,” Ximena continued, “it would be really dangerous to go back there, and that’s not even getting into the scope of the project—”

“Oh, please, there’s nothing in that forest I can’t blast.” She grinned, feeling the aches and pains recede, bit by bit. Not fully, not even mostly, but enough. “And if I can hitch a broom ride then I probably won’t have a crash like this, either—”
“But—”

“But what?” Alice shoved herself up to a kneeling position, looking Ximena dead in the eye.

“But you can’t just make a new Grand Triskelion!” Ximena hissed.

The statement hung in the air. Alice wondered if anyone outside the room had heard it—if anyone else was prepared for what she was going to create. Ximena, at least, didn’t seem prepared: she glanced from side to side and added, “And for what? A school project?”

“I don’t see why not.” Alice smirked. “Witches made it. We’re witches. What’s the issue?”

“Oh, that is so not the relevant qualification!” Ximena dragged a hand down her face, and then turned beseechingly to Rain. “You agree with me, right?”

Rain nodded. “I mean, aside from anything else, there’s a bit of a time crunch. The project’s due next week. You wanna try to make it before next week?”

“Well, obviously not!” Alice watched the two of them relax, and she couldn’t help but smile wider as she followed up: “The idea is to present the theory for next week. We’ll go out and actually do it later.”

“Oh, madre de dios, this is ridiculous.” Ximena clutched at her left arm with her right as if trying to pull it off, and looked askance. “We are going to fail this project, this is so far beyond what we can actually do.” Obviously she wasn’t on board yet, but even Rain seemed dubious, despite her neutral dopey expression. This, said Alice’s hind brain, was gonna take some convincing.

She leaned forward. “Why would I be interested in only doing what I can actually do? If that’s what you want me to do, then I’ll just spend the rest of my life with my back to this bed. Is that what you want?” she said, punching at the mattress again, staring at the two of them.

“Dude,” Rain said in a tired tone, “that’s not—”

“No, it’s not.” Alice planted both hands on the mattress, pushing herself up inch by inch as she got out of bed. “I wanna shoot higher. I wanna aim at least as high as anyone’s ever flown, and then keep rising. And if I can do this—”

She landed on her feet, nearly losing her balance, nearly stumbling forward before Ximena grabbed her by the shoulder to steady her. Alice let out a little laugh, craning her neck up to look at Ximena. “Then who’s to say I can’t do whatever I want? You?”

Rain groaned. “No, obviously we’re not trying to—”

“We’d never say that,” Ximena said, earnestly.

“Of course you’re not.” Alice smiled. “You’re my friends.” She pushed herself away from Ximena, standing upright on her own power no matter how her body creaked. “So come on. We’ll do this. And if we fail, we might as well fail big, right?” She stuck out her hand, still held in a fist. “So are you with me?”

Ximena nodded, and put her hand atop Alice’s. Rain took a few seconds longer, but at last she added her hand to the pile. Alice pumped her hand down and up, breaking the stack. “All right. Let’s get moving.”

She leaned over, grabbed her scooter, and pulled it under her body. Resting her knee on the pad
was definitely a welcome change from standing up. “Come on,” she said, “isn’t it exciting? Knowing we’re doing something that no other witch has tried doing for over a thousand years?”

“Ugh, I think you mean terrifying,” Ximena said, opening the door.

“What’s the difference?” Alice snorted and pushed herself forward. *Okay, muscles,* she thought as they cried out in protest. *Let’s just get down to the cafeteria and we don’t have to do anything for the rest of the day.* The usual lies, basically. “Thanks again, by the way: it means a lot. Let's eat and talk about the plan.”

For the Black team, waking up had been uninteresting and breakfast had been uneventful. (Maybe everyone still felt too awkward after the previous night’s Truth or Dare to say anything.) Even the secret elevator ride up from the cafeteria hadn’t garnered much of a response from anyone.

Magic Runes, however, had been terrifying.

“I failed that test,” Mani whispered, biting her fingernails as the throng of students filed out of the class. “Oh, I definitely failed that test.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. You did fine, maybe.” Tiff tried to sound reassuring, but she had a feeling her own nerves were getting in the way of her intended tone. “I mean, there were a couple of questions I thought were really difficult, but I got them in the end.” The three of them were walking together, with the Shooting Star taking up its usual position by Tiffany’s side—although, with the crowd being as thick as it was, Scarlette wasn’t manifesting herself at the moment.

“Like which questions were difficult?”

“Er… question twenty three?”

“Oh no.” Mani hid her face behind her hands. “I thought that one was easy. I must have messed it up.”

“You people are overthinking it.”

The two of them looked to see Char ambling along beside them, arms folded behind her head. “Seriously, tests are all the same. Write something down and what happens, happens.”

“And how well do you usually do on those tests?” Tiff said, eyes narrowed.

Char shrugged. “Like I said—what happens, happens.”

“And when you say that you ‘did your best’, I notice I haven’t seen you studying for the test. Unless you want to show me your notes?”

“Nah.”

“I thought so!”

They were walking pretty slowly, and the rest of the students had passed them by now. This meant that Tiff felt comfortable stopping at the side of the hallway, holding out a hand to Mani, and asking, “What kind of notes did you take? Just so we can show Char how it’s really done.”
“Um….” Mani reached into her shoulder bag, pulled out a notebook, and opened it up. “It might not be helpful for you.”

“Why not? Notes are notes, aren’t—” Tiff looked at the notebook. The notes were in Arabic. “Okay, that’s why not.”

Mani sighed and put them back.

“But the point stands,” Tiff said, returning her attention to Char. “If you didn’t take notes for this, and we both know that you didn’t, then I don’t think you ‘did your best’.”

Scarlette flickered on, lying on her broom. “You said it, Tiffany!” She gave a thumbs up and vanished just as quickly.

Tiff smirked. “And you can’t see it, but Scarlette just agreed with me, which means I’m right.”

“Your imaginary friend’s a jerk.” Char was looking away at the wall as she spoke. “Well, whatever. S’done now. No use crying over spilled milk.”

“You say that as if you’re not the one who knocked the metaphorical carton over—”

“To one side, short kid,” said a raspy voice.

Tiff realized two things at the same time. The first was that she was in the middle of the hallway, a fact she immediately rectified by flattening herself against the wall—and pulling the Shooting Star out of the way too, after some momentary hesitation. The second thing was that the voice in question was the Sucy Manbavaran.

She’d once thought that Diana Cavendish was the definition of grace. She still did, really. But if that was true, then Sucy Manbavaran was the re-definition of grace. Her slouching, swaying gait wasn’t elegant in any traditional sense, and yet she had such a clear, innate sense of poise that even under the burden of a dozen potion bottles—which were filling her arms at this precise moment—she walked in a way that made it impossible for Tiff to look elsewhere.

Oh, and Akko and Lotte were there too, she supposed.

A hand interposed itself in front of her face, and started snapping its fingers. “Earth to Tiff,” Char said, snapping several more times until Tiff focused her gaze on her. “What, have you never seen Akko’s weird friends before?”

A third interesting fact pinged Tiff’s head at that point: she had admitted to having a crush the previous night. “Well, uh,” she said quite articulately, “um….”

“Are you okay?” Mani’s voice radiated concern. “Your eyes look kind of weird.”

Tiff shook herself. “I just, just saw that that one friend of Akko’s looked terribly overburdened, and I decided that, ah, I had to help! Yes! Be right back!”

Yes, that sounded reasonable and not at all like what someone hiding a crush would say. She turned around and ran before she could judge their reactions, and caught up to Akko’s group just in time to hear Akko say, “Well, yes, but what if the hundred duck sized horses learned to coordinate?”

“I don’t think that makes sense,” Lotte said flatly. “They’re not that smart.”
“They’re also not usually duck sized! We don’t know what would happen!”

“Excuse me!” Tiff said, jogging in front of them.

Akko gave her a friendly wave, but Tiff ignored her to look at Sucy, as large parts of her mind yelled ‘oh god why are you doing this what is wrong with you’. “I was just noticing that you, uh, you’ve got a lot of potions there! Yeah! And I was thinking, gosh, that’s too many potions to carry at one time! I should help you carry some of them! So, well, would you like me to help you carry some of them?”

In the seconds that followed, Tiffany prayed to heaven that Scarlette knew some really secret holes in this old castle, because she wanted to crawl into one of them and die. Sucy looked at her with a customarily blank expression, still clutching her potions like a pile of tiny babies. However, just as Tiff’s nerve was about to break and send her running away in defeat, Sucy shrugged. “Sure.”

“You’re very welco—”

Before Tiff could finish the word, her arms were being loaded up with what felt like twice as many potions as Sucy had even been carrying. “Take these to my room,” Sucy said. “Door’s always unlocked. You can put them on my desk next to the other ones.” The more she talked, the faster her voice got: “Place them sorted by color, from most to least red in tint, left to right. Don’t touch any of my other potions or you’re dead. That’s not a threat, it’s a description of what will happen if you touch any of my other potions. They are extremely toxic.”

Tiff nodded.

“All right. Go forth, minion.”

Tiff nodded again, spun on her heel, and ran for the nearest staircase. She beamed as she ran. As nicknames went, you could do worse than minion.

The nearest staircase, however was the other way, which meant she ran past Char on the way. “Hey, stop,” Char said, “you’ve got something on your nose.”

“What?” Tiff skidded to a stop. “What, where?”

“Hang on….” Char leaned forward, frowning. Then she shook her head. “No, nevermind. I guess it’s always that brown.”

Tiff groaned and kept running.

Sucy stared at Lotte, then at Akko. “Question,” she said. “Do I know her?”

“You punched a roc,” Rain said as she dismounted her broom in the Triskelion’s clearing.

“I panicked!” Ximena was clutching her left arm as she dismounted just ahead of Rain. It was the
arm she’d used for the punch. “It was coming right at us and—”

“Dude, that was not criticism.” Rain’s mouth was hanging slightly open when she wasn’t talking.
“You punched a roc.”

“Oh. Um… thanks?” Ximena looked behind her at Alice, who had ridden behind her rather than flying her own broom. Energy conservation was the name of the game. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks, but I totally could have done that.” She could have! Alice could have blasted the roc with her own magic—Ximena had just been quicker. Alice grumbled to herself as she slid off the broom.

“It was like hitting a pigeon with your car,” Rain said, stepping further toward the center of the clearing. Her voice had a trance-like quality about it.

“We can stop talking about the monster now!” Ximena clutched her arm tighter, shivering, and walked past Rain toward the great tree. Her eyes flicked from side to side the whole time, and they didn’t stop once she reached the tree and planted her back against it.

Alice shrugged. “Eh, relax. Just give me a minute while I cast some spells….” She pointed her wand at the edge of the clearing, murmured under her breath, and a mote of light shot from her wand to the treeline. It landed and started blinking regularly, like the light atop a radio tower. “Once I’ve set a bunch of these up, they’ll give us advance warning if anything’s coming, and then Ximena can just punch it again, I guess—”

“Save your energy, my friend. I think we’re safe anyway.” Rain was looking around the clearing too, but at an unhurried pace to contrast with Ximena’s measured panic. At length, she sank into a meditative sitting position, right in the Triskelion’s middle. “This place is… holy. It’s full of mystical energies.”

“Mystical energies, huh?” Alice snorted and flicked her wand, yanking the mote of light back to her wand like a fish on the end of a line. “Are these mystical energies quantifiable in any way?”

“Nah, dude. That’s what makes them mystical.”

“Well, dude, quantifying them is—”

“Not a dude.”

(“You keep saying that,” Ximena sighed.)

“It’s why we’re here!” Alice yelped. If this scheme of hers was going to get off the ground, Alice had to understand what she was actually trying to replicate. Ambling over to one of the Triskelion’s three swirls, Alice held up her wand and shook it as if it were a glowstick. “Hey, Ximena?” she called out, frowning. “Can you come over here?”

Ximena trotted over, still half-hugging herself. “Chill, seriously,” Alice said with a roll of her eyes. “Just, I don’t think I’m gonna have the juice to do all of this myself, so can you cast a spell with me?”

“Er… what spell?”

Alice pocketed her wand and recited the words for the spell. It took ten whole seconds. At the end, Ximena blinked. “Can you… repeat that?”
Alice groaned. “Look, it’s not that hard. I’ll write it down if you really want.” She unfolded a piece of paper from her pocket, murmured under her breath, and held her wand over the paper: a phonetic transcription of the spell in question appeared, as if burned into the page. “Here,” she said. “It’s a super simple spell that takes all relevant magical readings from a ball of minimal radius centered around the wand, and transcribes them onto several pieces of paper that I’ve linked up beforehand, waiting back at our dorm.”

Ximena stared at her. “Say that again, slowly. Particularly the part where it’s ‘super simple’.”

“Ugh, are you with me on this or not?” Alice grabbed the paper and shoved it in Ximena’s face. “Just say what it says here, hold your wand down close to the edge of the Triskelion itself, and go around until we’ve got a whole perimeter. Easy peasy. Or are you not up for this?”

Ximena nodded. “You can count on me.”

She took the paper, and they got to work. Alice called out the spell, all ten seconds of it, and started crawling around the Triskelion itself. After several seconds, presumably seconds spent scrutinizing Alice’s wandwriting, Ximena stumbled her way through the words of the spell: then, she too was going around the Triskelion. Instead of crawling, she walked while squatting, dragging her wand along the ground behind her.

They met a little before Alice rounded her first swirl. Which meant that Ximena had processed over two thirds of the Triskelion, unlike Alice who had managed less than one third. Alice sighed as she deactivated her wand and slumped over on the ground; crawling was laborious work.

“What?” Ximena asked, still sounding unaccountably timid. “What’s with the sigh—are you okay?”

“Nothing,” Alice said, and Ximena relaxed a bit. “Just… I wish….” That I was like you, with your zero problems in life whatsoever, were the words she didn’t say, because that seemed like a weird thing to say even if it was true. “Nevermind,” she said instead, and shoved herself to her feet in defiance of angry muscles. “Just a dumb thought. We’ve still got work to do.”

“It’s no use,” Mani mumbled, sprawled out on her comforter.

“Ah, don’t be that way,” Char said from her bottom bunk. “You’ll get it if you keep trying.” She then reached out, grabbed her sandwich, and took a big bite. Crumbs went everywhere.

It was just the two of them, spending lunch away from the cafeteria. Tiffany and her weird broom were busy touring the campus and having a grand old time, probably.

“Thanks for the confidence,” Mani muttered. “But you’re sounding a lot like Tiff right now.”

“Ouch. That bad, huh?”

“Not bad? Not exactly? But….” Mani sighed and slumped back down on her bed. “I don’t know how to say it. It’s great to have someone who thinks you can do it, or says you can, no matter what. But there’s something… patronizing?” She pursed her lips. “Yes. Patronizing about it too. Like… what, you think I can do it if I just try hard enough? You’re not the one dealing with this! What do you know about how hard I’m trying!??” Her volume, she realized, was rising as she spoke.
“So….” Char let the syllable draw itself out for a few seconds. “You can’t do it. You’re never gonna be able to do it.” A pause. “Is that what you wanna hear?”

“Ugh, I don’t know!” Mani slapped her hands over her face, thumping her legs against the bed as if running in place. “I don’t know what I want! That’s the whole problem! I go to all those stupid MOP meetings and I still don’t know!” She let out a ragged groan. “I mean, you know what that’s like, right? Not knowing what you want?”

“Oh, mate, that is not my problem.” Char chuckled. “I know exactly what I want out of life. The question is, should I want it?”

"Why are you always so cryptic?"

"It's fun." Mani heard her sitting up on her bed. “Look. I dunno. I think Tiff means well, right?”

"And I dunno if that’s good enough.”

“Well… yeah. She can be a bit ‘one step forward, two steps back’.” Char sighed. “I blame her invisible broom friend. Or, you know, maybe there is no invisible broom friend and she’s just going crazy. Either way.”

“Either way.” Mani grunted.

“Look. We both know you wanna get this thing under control. Maybe you just need to keep practicing.”

“I have been practicing.”

“I know, I know, but… what else is there?” Char exhaled. “Maybe it just takes even longer. Look, let’s try a thing.”

Mani heard ripping. She sat up, pulling her hands off her face, and saw that Char was tearing a page of looseleaf from a notebook. “Super simple,” Char said, holding up the paper in front of her. “Adcaelum on this. It’s literally the lightest thing in here, so it’ll be easy. Just keep your magic really under control….”

Mani sighed. “Fine. Here goes nothing.” She reached out to her bedside table, grabbed her wand, and stared at the piece of paper that was in front of Char’s face. “Focusing on the paper… deep breaths… Adcaelum.”

“So,” Scarlette was saying, “there I was with Woodward, and she said—” Before she could get further, her projection fizzled out, and the Shooting Star clattered back onto the chair she was using. A few seconds later, she was back, heaving deep breaths and clutching her head. “Okay! Apparently I don’t remember that tale quite as well as I had thought!”

“Oohhhh….” Tiff winced in sympathy. She was sitting across from Scarlette after an enjoyable several minutes spent flying around the school together, enjoying her lunch as Scarlette regaled her with stories. About half, so far, had ended like this. “We really need to find your missing pieces.”

“Yeah, a bit!” Scarlette sucked in a breath. “It could be worse, I guess. I could be blowing
everything up that I tried to cast a spell on.”

Tiff frowned. “Scarlette, she’s not that bad. It’s not like she screws up every spell she casts.”

“Sure, sure, just nearly every spell she casts.”

“Well, you’re not wrong, but—”

“Tiff!”

The shout came from the edge of the cafeteria, and Tiff turned around to see Mani running toward her. In one hand she held a wand, and in the other she held a sheet of looseleaf with a hole burned through the center. “I just messed up a spell I cast,” she said as soon as she got close.

Scarlette snickered.

Akko, on her way to class, became aware of a huffing noise.

She looked around and saw nothing. Then she heard the voice above her: “So… many… joists.”

She looked up and squinted. “Char?”

“Yo, big sis.”

“Are you… okay up there?”

“You kidding? I’m on top of the world.”

Akko snorted. “I get it. Need a hand?”

“Nah, I’m good. I’m always good.”

Akko shrugged. “If you say so….” She squinted, but continued on to class.

“Professor Badcock?” Tiff said as she leaned through the classroom door.

The professor in question looked up from her lesson plan impatiently. “Yes? What is it?”

“Can you please excuse Char Jones from class?”

Badcock’s eyes narrowed. “And just why should I do that? Has she decided to sleep through it?”

“Just… come and see.”

Badcock stalked toward the door, at which point Tiff moved aside and raised her arm, guiding the professor’s gaze upward. “Well, I’m not sure what you want me to look at, Miss Vandergard, but…”
She trailed off, presumably because she saw Char. Char, who was standing upside-down on the ceiling. Apparently, and rather predictably, Mani had tried to use an *Adcaelum* spell on a piece of paper Char was holding—only for her supercharged magic to blast through the paper and strike Char instead. “Sorry, teach,” Char said, laughing out loud. “I guess all those years of being Australian have finally come back to haunt me.”

Professor Badcock’s eyes bulged.

“You know, because Australia is on the bottom of the world, and… whatever. Everyone’s a critic.”

Tiff twirled a finger into her hair, tugging at it a little. “You would not believe how hard it was to get her here,” she said. “So many vaulted ceilings… may I be excused for a few minutes to get her to the hospital wing? I don’t want her to have an accident, or get outside the school somehow and….”

“Fall into space,” Professor Badcock completed. “Yes, I suppose someone responsible had better make sure she gets safely restored.” (Tiff glowed a little at the word ‘responsible.’) “You two may go!”

Char smiled and turned away, starting to walk along the ceiling. Tiff was about to follow when she felt a hand on her shoulder. “However,” Badcock said in a much quieter tone, “I feel I must advise you about the academic danger you’re putting yourself in here.”

Tiff frowned. “What do you mean, Professor?”

“You your charitable impulses are admirable toward your… lesser team members. However, if her imminently failing grade is any indication, Charlotte Jones is determined to flunk out of Luna Nova, and there’s only so much you can do in that case.” Badcock shook her head solemnly. “You’re a competent witch, Miss Vandergard, from a decent family to boot. I’d hate to see you get dragged down trying to solve someone else’s—”

“Hold on.” Tiff held up a hand. “Imminently failing grade?”

Professor Badcock raised an eyebrow at her. “Why, I thought you would have known as her roommate. Yes, thanks to poor performance in homework, in-class work, and tests, Charlotte Jones is in danger of failing my class.”

The words were like dropping a pile of books in a big, echoey library. Tiff stared as the reverberations rattled her brain.

“In fact, I understand that she’s in similar danger in several other classes. Hard to be surprised when a student who treats laziness as a character trait is not succeeding in class, I must say.” Then she smiled, as if she thought she was being kind—mostly she just looked pleased. “But as I’ve said, you’re quite a decent student—perhaps not a prodigy, but you’ve shown every sign that you can thrive and even excel in Luna Nova. Don’t let yourself get tied to a millstone.”

She turned around and headed back into class, closing the door behind her.

“See? What’d I tell ya.” Scarlette manifested next to her, leaning back on the Shooting Star like it was a fully reclined chair at the pool, and not a thin red stick of wood. It put Tiff in mind of a tightrope artist showing off. “She’s not up to par.”

How appropriate, since Scarlette was walking a very fine line. “Look,” Tiff said. “I know Char is lazy. I know she doesn’t try. I know that she can come across as infuriating at times!” She stomped forward. “She may well be ‘not up to par’! But here’s something else you need to know—”
Scarlette rolled her eyes. “What?” Tiff scowled. “I’m trying to talk to you! What, is there something on the ceiling that’s more interesting than what I’m…..”

She stopped, and with a horrible foreboding sensation, looked up.

“Yo,” Char said, looking at her. Well, almost looking at her. On further inspection, she seemed to be looking at a point about a foot away from Tiffany.

Tiff gulped. “I… thought you were going to the nurse.”

“Kind of a pain to climb over all these joists. Seriously, they’re everywhere.” Char yawned. “Figured I’d wait for you. Glad I did. Meant I got to hear you call me lazy. Say I wasn’t up to par, and so on.” She shrugged. “Kind of wondering what you were gonna call me next, honestly. Don’t mind me, keep going.”

“Oh, for—” Tiff glared up. “I’m quoting you! It’s literally the first thing you told me about yourself other than your name! You said that you, and I quote, hate effort!”

Char sighed. “Yeah, I guess that’s fair.”

“No, you don’t get to try to guilt me now—*adcaelum!* Tiff whipped out her wand, tapped herself, and rose a few feet into the air. She was still under Char, but they were closer. Tiff could see how bad a job Char was doing of not looking hurt. “Mani’s been trying to help you! I’ve been trying to help you! You don’t get to deny my help and then, and then get mad when I point out why you’re failing!”

“Of course not. You know best.” Char looked off to the side. “You know everything.”

“Stop it!” Tiff tried to stamp her foot, except she had no ground to stand on. “I’m trying to help you, Char! I’m not saying this because I think I’m—because I think I’m better than you?” She gritted her teeth. “I’m not looking down on you.”

Char sighed. “I guess that depends on your perspective.” She turned away. “I don’t think Luna Nova has any holes in the roof, so I can get to the nurse myself. Don’t follow me.” She hopped up, pulled herself over a joist, and started moving.

Tiff found herself sinking down to the floor, producing a weird weightless sensation in her stomach as the *Adcaelum* spell wore off. Her head hung low as her feet touched down.

Scarlette floated in front of her, sitting on the Star with her legs dangling over one side. “You don’t think that you’re better than she is?” The tone was strangely accusatory, even incredulous.

Tiff squirmed, looking away. “Well… I mean…..”

“You should. You *are* I mean, you have to be.” Scarlette shrugged. “If you’re not better, how then can you help?”

Still refusing to meet her gaze, Tiff turned around and made for the door—

“I mean, you’re surely better than the Moor.”

—only to freeze with her fingers on the handle. “Do you mean Mani?”

“Of course I do. For stars’ sake, look at her!” Scarlette let out a laugh. “She forced the lazy one upon the ceiling in the first place, didn’t she? For shame.”
“Char.”

“Beg pardon?”

Tiff whirled around, advancing upon Scarlette. “My friends’ names are Mani and Char. I don’t care how incompetent you think they are, they are my friends and they have names, and you need to start respecting that.” She glowered, now face to face with the twelve-year-old hovering before her. “And furthermore, Mani can’t control her magic. You don’t get to act as if she’s somehow deficient because of it.”

Scarlette blew a raspberry. “I think she could control it—if she tried.” The Star floated higher as her dangling legs kicked back and forth, as if she were on a swingset. One of them came dangerously close to Tiff’s face.

Tiff leaned back to dodge it. “She is trying. Char might not be, but Mani definitely is!” Tiff groaned. “Look. If you’re going to follow me around all the time, can I at least get you not to insult my friend at every opportunity? And to use their actual names?”

“No promises.”

Tiff ground her teeth and walked into class, slamming the door before Scarlette could make it through.

MOP classes were in Blytonbury still, in the park near sundown. Mani sometimes found that funny: Akko Kagari could convince a town to overthrow its mayor, but she couldn’t convince the teachers at Luna Nova to spare her a gymnasium.

Today, nothing was funny.

“Okay,” Akko said, clapping her hands so loudly Mani might swear she’d used a spell to increase the volume. She hovered on her broom, using just her legs to keep balanced as she gesticulated. “Five minutes left in practice, ladies, and you’ve all done great! We’re gonna finish off with a gentle fly around the town. Just follow behind me single file. Diana’s gonna go down the line, make sure everyone’s got good form, since she’s better at that little stuff than I am.” She angled her broom up, raising her body by a few feet. “Ready?”

A general chorus of agreement came from the line behind her. There were a lot of witches here now—all the ones that had come to that oh-so-eventful first day, plus at least a dozen more of all ages. They wore cheap robes, wielded flimsy wands, and the brooms they were riding had been rescued from the thrift store bargain bin or Luna Nova’s trash heap—but they were witches, and every one of them brimmed with confidence.

And unlike Mani, they weren’t absolutely covered in scratches and scuff marks and splotches of dirt from crashing into the ground over and over and over—

“Then let’s go!” Akko waved a hand behind herself, as if inviting a plane to leave the ground. “Take off!”

Mani shook herself, and muttered, “Tia freyre.” As usual, her broom jerked upward as quickly as possible, so unlike the graceful ascents of just about everyone else there. Even that Widdecombe
girl—the one she’d saved from magic buildup a few weeks back, the one who should have been most like her—rose gently.

“Remember, this is just a nice, simple, easy flight!” Akko rose up, and the other brooms followed behind her. It put Mani in mind of dancing dragons at Chinese festivals she’d seen videos of, with dozens of polebearers working together to create a dragon that flowed like a river. The teamwork here wasn’t quite so seamless, of course; Akko flew like she’d been born with a broom under her butt, but the other witches were much stiffer, a lot slower, and they looked down at the ground more often.

Mani kept her gaze straight ahead. “Keep it together,” she murmured to herself, “keep it together, keep it together, keep it together….”

They set out away from the park, moving at the kind of pace a bicycle might take toward a corner of the town. As they neared it, Akko banked to the right, leaning to the side of her broom like there wasn’t a ten foot drop below her. The witches behind her, on the other hand, seemed a little more aware of the cobblestones below.

“Try to relax,” Mani heard Diana saying as she moved down the line. “You won’t be able to make turns at higher speeds than this if you’re that rigid. Think of it like riding a bicycle: you have to lean into the turns, and trust your bicycle not to let you fall off.”

“Keep it together,” Mani kept muttering, “keep it together, keep it together—”

It felt like she was holding a tempest in a teapot and trying to keep the lid on. It felt like she was a little Dutch boy in a cartoon, keeping her finger in a dam to keep it from bursting. Basically, it felt like she was wasting her time. What was the point of all of this?

They were reaching the next corner of the town, but rather than making a ninety degree turn, Akko went through a hundred and eighty degrees. “Good work, everyone!” she said with a smile, and then she flew past Mani, and smiled extra hard. “Really good job to you, Mani! You’re working really hard!”


She was accelerating. She realized it too late to stop. “Watch out!” she yelled.

No one had time to watch out. Mani plowed through the dozen witches in front of her like a bowling ball through pins, sending them flying off their brooms. She yelped and banked hard, losing her momentum before she could crash into anything else, and watched in horror as the witches started falling—

A dozen iridescent bubbles appeared around the witches, taking the reins from gravity to let them float safely to the ground. Once they had landed, Diana Cavendish pocketed her wand. “Try to find your brooms, everyone,” she called down. “Then just fly back to the park. Don’t worry about following the rest of the line.”

The fallen witches grumbled as they walked around, arguing over whose scattered brooms were whose in the fading light of sunset. Mani, still holding her hovering position, kept seeing them glare up at her.

She sighed, angled herself toward the park, and dove toward it in as controlled a burst of speed as she could manage. To her credit, she almost didn’t overshoot, and only had to jog back a couple dozen yards to the park’s gazebo after she landed. She sat down on a bench inside the gazebo—still
wet from recent rain: she swept as much of the water off as she could—and waited for everyone to come back.

A few minutes later, they did. Akko still had her ever-present smile, but the other witches didn’t look so enthusiastic. Most of them kept glancing at Mani, but once everyone had arrived, Akko let herself take center stage yet again: “All right, everyone, that’s really good work! More flight lessons are same time next week, and, uh….“ She laughed. “Maybe I’ll look into getting hard hats as well as witch hats.”

The other witches laughed. It wasn’t even funny, as far as Mani could tell. Akko was just so likable that everyone was under her spell.

“Thanks for coming to the MOP meeting!” Akko waved her hand as hard as she could, like she was trying to swat something out of the sky. “Bye-eeee!”

The crowd dispersed. “Well!” Akko was saying, facing Diana as the two of them walked back toward the gazebo. “We got, like, three more people than we had last week, right? That’s pretty good numbers!”

“If it gets too much larger, we’ll need to start splitting up classes,” Diana replied with a little smile.

Mani looked down at the floorboards.

“Yeah! Hey, speaking of which, did I tell you?” Akko’s voice lowered, as if she were trying to be confidential, but it was more like a stage whisper than an actual whisper. “I got some mail over the witchernet from some witches in Glastonbury. They want to set up their own MOP! Isn’t that….”

She trailed off as Mani heard her footsteps upon the gazebo’s floor. “Mani?” Akko said.

Mani kept looking down. After a few seconds, she heard the bench creak next to her, and saw Akko sitting in her peripheral vision. “You really did do a good job today, overall.” Mani snorted at that, but Akko pressed on: “I’m serious. Flying is really hard. It took way longer for me to—”

“There were seven year olds flying today,” Mani said, cutting Akko off. “Seven year olds, and they weren’t crashing into everyone else. But yes, I’m sure it is really hard.”

“It is, though!” Akko leaned closer, her voice gregarious. “Keep this a secret between friends, but I used to be completely unable to fly. Seriously, put me in the sky on a broom and I’d drop like a rock!” Then she paused. “Wait, did you already know that? I guess you probably don’t have to keep it a secret between friends if you already knew it. Where was I….”

She trailed off, and Mani felt the words brewing in her mouth, and couldn’t help herself: “Since when are we friends?”

Akko didn’t trail back up for a long few seconds. In that time, Mani slid sideways away from her on the bench. “Are we… not friends?” Akko said at last. She sounded like Mani had just shoved her away.

Ya homaar. “I just… you’re more of a teacher, mentor, person,” she stammered, “which is a little different than being a friend, exactly?” Keep it together, keep it together….

“Oh….” Akko didn’t sound convinced, and Mani looked up to see her frowning just a bit. “I… Mani, am I doing something wrong with how I’m trying to help you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I’m going back to school.” She tried to look away from Akko, but
there was a feeling in her gut that felt like magic building up. *Keep it together*....

“No, seriously, if there’s something I’ve done wrong since I met you, let me know and I’ll try not to do it again.” Akko chuckled awkwardly. “It wouldn’t be the first time, trust me.”

*Keep it together*.... “You haven’t done anything wrong since you met me, and I said I don’t want to talk about it.” The feeling was getting stronger, and stronger—

“You’re really obviously upset about something,” Akko said, stepping forward, “so why can’t you tell me—”

“YOU WANNA KNOW WHAT YOU DID?”

The words echoed throughout the park, over and over. Mani wasn’t paying attention. She was stalking toward Akko, who was stumbling back. “I’ll tell you what you did, ya kalb!” she screamed. “You flew up there on that stupid broom and acted like you were some kind of HERO, and you put this, this MAGIC in me, and now I have to spend every waking moment trying not to EXPLODE something! Now I have to uproot my ENTIRE LIFE, go to some CRAZY SCHOOL in ENGLAND, a THOUSAND MILES AWAY, and spend every day feeling like an IDIOT because YOU wanted to play STAGE MAGICIAN on the TELEVISION!” She jabbed her finger at Akko. “You wanna know what you DID? You RUINED my LIFE!”

She was heaving breaths, and then noticed Diana standing next to Akko, looking just as shocked. “Both of you RUINED my LIFE!” she shrieked, pointing at Diana in turn. “Ya sharmouta!”

She heaved some more breaths. One by one her senses returned: the echoes in the park repeating every vile curse she’d just disgorged; her sense of touch telling her about the moisture in the corners of her eyes, which she wiped away quickly; and last of all, sight, showing her Akko’s face. She looked like someone had just ripped her heart from her chest and stomped on it.

Mani looked briefly down at Akko’s shoes, and tried to get her breaths back under control. She snarled under her breath. “I am so tired of exploding.” Then she looked back up. “I’m sorry,” she lied, “I don’t know what came over me.”

Akko stepped forward, reaching out a hand without seeming to notice. “Mani… I didn’t—”

Mani shook herself. In all the excitement, her headscarf had come somewhat undone, and she quickly readjusted it before refocusing. “I don’t know whether it was really your fault—having magic come back like this, that is. And I’m glad you’re trying to make it right with this MOP business, that’s all very fair. I’m even glad you’re trying to teach me, and you have been very helpful, but—” She shook her head. “Don’t call us friends. We’re not friends.”

She walked to where she’d dropped her broom outside the gazebo. Akko and Diana both watched her as she went. “I hope you have a safe trip back to Luna Nova,” she said. “Have a good night. Tia freyre.”

She jerked off the ground, pointed herself at the Glastonbury Tor, and was off. “Keep it together,” she muttered to herself, “keep it together, keep it together—.”

“Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh,” Tiff groaned in the big empty library.
There was a pile of books on her table, and it was taller than Tiffany herself. And sure, she wasn’t *that* tall, but it still counted.

She’d combed through the library *again*. She’d selected even the books which seemed only tangentially related to magic creation. She’d even gotten Scarlette to show her some of the secret compartments with their hidden books… which had been mostly a bust, unfortunately. As it turned out, leaving a book in a cool dark room may have been the best way to store it, but it didn’t quite hold up for books that had been hidden for over a thousand years—particularly when no one who could have maintained the books even knew about them. When she’d seen the faded text and crumbling parchment, Tiff had had to hold back tears.

In any case, she’d gotten *everything* she could think of, and there was *nothing*. Nothing in this whole library that could help her create any new spells that were worth a darn! “Ugh!” she repeated, slamming her head down on the desk. It hurt, and she wished she hadn’t done it, but there were certain dramatics you had to respect. “How am I supposed to *do this*?”

She slumped down into the table. After a few seconds, she peered up at one of the many tomes she’d gotten about the Nine Olde Witches. “How?” she mumbled. “How am I supposed to come up with anything that’s as good as what the old masters of witchcraft came up with?”

“Yeah, we were *pretty great*.” Scarlette floated lazily by, flat on her back on the Star.

Tiff growled. Then she heard a sound echo in the library that sounded like muffled laughter, but when she looked around, she didn’t see anyone laughing.

Alice peeked back over the balcony. “Do you think she saw us?” she whispered, looking first at Ximena—who was crouched beside her—and then at Rain.

Rain hadn’t bothered ducking. She shrugged. “Who cares?”

“Eh, you’re right. Who cares.” Alice laughed again. “This is *perfect*. We’re gonna have the best project of all time, and she has *no ideas at all*. Hah!”

“Hilarious,” said Rain.

“And look! No one’s even with her except her *stupid broom*.” Alice couldn’t stop herself from giggling as she, and frankly, why should she have? Watching Tiffany get her comeuppance like this may as well have been an early birthday present. How’d it feel to be left out to dry, huh?

“Yo, dude.”

Alice glanced up to see that Rain had walked toward the door, and was beckoning her over. Her eyes seemed unusually magnified behind her glasses. “I think the library has, like, a no shit-talking rule. We should probably split.”

Ximena cocked her head, standing up. “Why would we split up?”

“Split as in leave.”

“Oh. That was not clear.”
Alice shrugged, pushing herself back onto her scooter and pushing herself toward Rain. “Fine. I guess we can leave her to wallow all by herself.”

“Cool. That sounds super cool.” Rain stayed where she was as Alice scootered herself closer, with Ximena walking alongside. Her stare similarly remained constant. “Also? Quick question.”

There was an edge to those words. Alice didn’t like it. “Yeah?”

“So, this project we’re doing, with the Triskelion and whatever. It’s definitely something we’re doing so you can be the greatest witch, right? And not, say, so you can get one over on your ex?”

“Pardon?” Ximena said, looking at Rain. “I thought it was more like showing up everyone who said she couldn’t be a great witch.”

Alice pouted. “I can have more than one reason for things! I’m a complex person!”

“All right, sure, cool, whatever.” Rain glanced down for a moment, pulling an acupuncture needle from her pocket to fiddle with it. Then she resumed her unblinking gaze. “Was Tiffany one of those people who said you couldn’t?”

“She…” Alice hissed out a breath, and pushed herself forward on her scooter, through the exit. “She might as well have been.”

“Yeah, dude, that’s not exactly the same as a yes.”

“Who cares if it’s a yes, dude?” They left the library, and Alice pivoted on her scooter in the corridor beyond. “What does it matter to you?”

“Wow, I dunno. Maybe because it’s my project too.” Rain’s fidgeting grew more frenetic, but she stood her ground. “What has got you so uptight about this? Spill.”

She and Alice stared at each other. Finally Alice groaned and got off her scooter. “Fine, if you really must know, we had a deal when we were growing up. We were gonna be the two best witches in the world. She was gonna be the best with a broom, and I was gonna be the best with a wand. Flight versus magic, you know? Except I got sick, and oh no! Poor widdle Alice can’t hold up her end of the deal anymore! I guess big strong Tiffany has to pick up the slack and become a real witch, since Alice can’t pull it off!”

She snorted and spun around, facing the wall. “Except I could have! I could have been a contender—and now I am one. And now Tiffany’s gonna regret every single stupid day she ever spent thinking I wasn’t up to the task.” She whirled around, and said, “So are you with me, or….”

Ximena looked like she was absolutely with her: hunched slightly forward, eyes shining. Rain, on the other hand, hadn’t changed her expression one bit. “What?” Alice said. “What more do you want?”

“No, s’all good. I heard enough.” Rain broke eye contact again, looking down and reaching into her pockets. This time, she pulled out even more needles to fidget with, at increasing speed. “Super cool to know that it is literally a grudge. Outta sight.”

“Oh, why do I even bother—look.” Alice looked away, taking a moment to marshal her thoughts. Maybe she hadn’t explained it well enough? “All I’m asking here is for you to trust me. We’re all friends here, right? So if you’re my friends, dude, you’ll trust me and—”
The motion was faster than Alice could process. One moment, Rain was working at a half-dozen
acupuncture needles in her hands: the next, her hand was flung out to the side, and there was a glint
of light and a whoosh of noise—

And those half-dozen needles were embedded in the wall, up to their hilts.

“Enough with the bullshit,” Rain growled, and her voice was an octave lower than Alice had ever
heard it. Alice flinched back as Rain advanced upon her, and thrust her arm out—and took Ximena
by the wrist. “Come on, dude, let’s split. And yeah, this time it does mean split up.”

Ximena resisted. “Rain, what—”

“Fucking come on! We don’t have to take this.”

Rain kept pulling, and Ximena finally let herself be dragged, even as her facial expression
remained bewildered. Not as bewildered as Alice felt, though: she stared at them, jaw working
fruitlessly. “Wha… what? What are you so….” She tried to laugh, looking between the two of
them, searching for some sign of support. “Ximena, are you—I mean, seriously—it’s just a school
project.”

“It’s not the project, dude.” Rain spared another glance toward her. Her voice was cracking, higher
than it had been, and her cheeks were red. “It’s you.” She looked away and kept walking, Ximena
following meekly behind.

Only a few seconds later, they were gone, leaving Alice all alone. “What did I do?” she asked, and
no one was there to answer.

She was on her way to class when mushrooms erupted all around her, blocking her way and the
light all at once.

Mani gripped her book tight against her chest. “Uh, pardon me?” she said. “What’s going on?” She
had just been trailing behind her friends on the way to class… well, the friends in question weren’t
acting very friendly right now, not after the argument yesterday about Char’s grades. As bad as that
tension had been, though, she’d take it over being trapped in an instant swamp any day.

“You know, when someone makes Akko sad, she comes back to my room to cry.”

The raspy voice seemed to come from all around her. Mani gagged as she whirled around. “Who is
that?”

“And when Akko comes back to my room to cry, I have to deal with it.” Mani whipped around
once more just in time to watch a silhouette appear between the mushrooms, which resolved itself
into the figure of Sucy Manbavaran. Her eyes narrowed. “And I don’t like dealing with it. So let’s
make this quick.”

Oh, god, it was Sucy Manbavaran. Mani backed away a few steps, but had to stop as her back hit a
forest of mushroom stalks. Sucy advanced upon her like a specter of death in the dim light, and all
of her general malevolent aura was laser focused right at Mani’s forehead. She had an uncorked
potion bottle in her right hand, and the bottle had a skull and crossbones insignia on it: it swung
carelessly as she walked, letting droplets of the concoction splash onto the floor. They burned right
through, releasing an acrid stench.

Mani wasn’t sure whether to look at the potion, or at Sucy’s red eyes, or literally anywhere else.

Finally, Sucy stopped just inches away from Mani’s face. The girl regarded her like a spider in a jar, and she held the potion up close, letting Mani see that the skull seemed to be screaming in hideous agony—and then she inverted it, right in front of Mani, letting it spill onto the floor. Mani jumped back, looking down as the poison sizzled through the carpet, the floorboards, even most of the rock below.

“Get over yourself,” Sucy said. Her voice sounded disinterested. “I don’t care what happened to you whenever. I don’t ever want to hear that you’ve treated Akko Kagari like that again. Clear?”

A little smidgen of courage found its way back into Mani’s throat. Just enough for her to ignore the steaming hole in the floor between her feet, look Sucy in the eyes again, and say, “Everything I told her was true.”

Sucy rolled her eyes. “I bet it was. You know what else is true? How she’s spent the better part of two months doing everything she can think of to help you. Wow, you’re so put upon.” She leaned forward. “I guess we weren’t clear before, so I’ll try again. If I ever hear you’ve told her off like that a second time….”

Goodbye, little smidgen of courage. Mani crouched down as Sucy leaned over her, blocking out what little light was left. Her teeth glinted like knives. “There will never be a third.”

And then—

Sucy pulled away. Mani felt her heart hammering a thousand beats a minute, cowering down in the corner. Sucy turned to the other side, pulled another potion from the apparently infinite reserve inside her robes, and tossed its contents at the opposite wall of mushrooms. Before Mani’s eyes, they wilted and decayed until all that remained of them was a sad pile of refuse, short enough to step over.

On the other side stood Tiff and Char, all argument forgotten as they stared at Sucy. “Hey, minion,” Sucy said, stepping over the refuse pile. “Clean the rest of this up.”

“Um… okay?”

Sucy tossed another potion at her chest, and Tiff fumbled it a few times before grabbing it out of the air. Then Sucy walked away.

“Hey,” Mani gasped.

Sucy turned back, her one visible eyebrow raised.

“Did she really cry?”

Sucy stared at her for several seconds, before grunting and turning away.

Mani wasn’t at all sure what to make of that. Then again, though, she was pretty preoccupied with trying to get enough air to a body that suddenly felt like she’d run a marathon. She sat down, flat on her butt, as Tiff got to work defoliating around her with the second potion.

“Mani,” Char said, softly but with feeling, “what the hell was that?”
“Yeah,” Tiff said, “what did you do?”

Mani licked her lips, trying to get them to be less dry. “I… may have told Akko she ruined my life.”

“What?” Char frowned, squinted, but then blinked. “Oh, because she brought magic back and that’s why you have magic, so….” She sucked air through her teeth. “Yeah, she maybe did a bit…”

Around her, Tiff finished withering away the mushrooms, then used her wand to sweep up all of the remains into a tightly packed ball. “Crumina,” she said, and a shimmering, translucent bag appeared around the trash. She held the bag with one hand, and offered the other hand to Mani.

Mani took it and pulled herself up. “Thanks.”

“Hey, look at it this way.” Char clapped her on the back, and in the wake of having been ambushed by the devil herself, Mani flinched so hard that Char flinched in response. “Whoa, okay, sorry. But if you hadn’t gotten magic then you wouldn’t have come here, right? And you wouldn’t have become friends with us?”

Mani sighed.

“I don’t know if you can call your presence such a big upside, Char,” Tiff said, in a strained voice, “given your imminent chance of departure.”

“Oh, lay off, this isn’t about me right now.”

“It is when you just made it about you.”

Now they were hissing at each other, as if they were trying not to get Mani’s attention. As if Mani wasn’t standing right in front of them. “Girls,” she said.

“Just let it be? We’re trying to be there for Mani right now.”

“And how do you plan on being here if you’re physically not here?”

“GIRLS!” Mani shouted, a lot louder than she meant to.

They shut up and looked at her.

“There’s….” Without really thinking about it, she pulled out her wand and anti-magic stone, and started tapping them together. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“—and then she told us she was thinking about dropping out in, like, a week!” Tiff yanked at her hair. “Like, are you kidding me? Both of my roommates might be leaving school, one after the other? How unlucky can one witch get!?”

She turned around and started pacing, the Shooting Star floating idly beside her: she tried not to pay any attention to it, in case Scarlette said something infuriating again. “And, like, I know she’s had a lot of trouble with it. But she’s been working really hard, and she’s getting better, and I don’t get why she’d throw that all away! If I could just figure out a way to show her how much magic
can help people....” She turned on her heel, marching the other way. “And if I can make this project good enough to maybe pull Char out of the danger zone for grades… which means I need to nail this project, I really do. It might be the most important thing I do ever!”

She turned around.

“Okay,” said Professor Croix. “I understand every part of that except why you’re telling it to me.”

They were standing in the Modern Magic classroom after class. During the class itself, Croix had holographically transported them to a barren Arctic wasteland while they worked on the similarities and differences between magical and electric currents. Croix, whose hologram floated on a disk in front of Tiffany, was decked out in a heavy-looking Eskimo coat but still wore her red cloak on the outside.

Tiff frowned. “I mean, I’m astonished I didn’t think of it before! You invented all these magitronics, didn’t you? No one else has ever integrated magic with technology like you have. Surely you must be the best person at this whole academy to ask about inventing new magic!”

“Yes, I am indeed a genius.” Professor Croix nodded. “So?”

“So, how did you do it? And can you teach me to figure out how to do it?” Tiff looked down at the ground. “Every time I feel like I’m getting close to an idea, it feels like I… like I run into some mental block. Like I have to throw away everything I come up with, because nothing ever feels good enough.”

“Hmm.” Croix tapped her chin with a gloved hand. “Meet me in my office after classes are complete. And bring your broom.” She rolled her eyes. “I mean, I should hope you bring your broom. You’d be crazy to take the stairs.”

She grinned, her hologram winked out, and the droid beneath it flew out the door.

“Ooh?” As if following some sort of conservation of holograms, Scarlette popped into existence. There were stars in her eyes. “Are we going to have some fun at last?”

Chapter End Notes

More art!
It's Mani, as depicted by the talented Humming-Fly! I'm very happy with how she turned out. Thanks, Humming-Fly!
Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter!
Blinding light.

That was the first thing Tiffany saw when she opened the door to Professor Croix’s office, and there was so much that she had to hold her hand in front of her eyes in self-defense. How strange: the last several times she’d been to this office, natural light had been so absent that a person would think the office was in a deep dungeon, not at the top of the New Moon Tower.

Today, though, Professor Croix seemed determined to make the most of the view: all the windows were open. “Come on out!” the professor called, as Tiffany’s eyes adjusted. Eventually she saw that Professor Croix was standing by the window, half-silhouetted in the late-afternoon light of a rare clear day—only half-silhouetted because the light was partly going through her, making her hard to see. “I’ve prepared a little exercise for you to try. Come on!”

Tiffany walked forward hesitantly, whereas Scarlette skipped past her with the Shooting Star in her hand. When they reached the window, Tiff saw that there was a stainless steel balcony just outside. Croix floated on through, and mimed leaning on a railing to the left. “All right, you’re here. Good. Wonderful!” She swept her other arm out theatrically. “Take a look around. What do you see?”

“Well….”

For reasons unknown to Tiffany, the New Moon Tower was set a decent couple hundred yards away from the rest of the school. Right now, this meant that she had a pretty great view of Luna Nova proper—or she would, under normal circumstances. The sun, which was mostly set by this point, cast most of the building in shadow, which meant the building itself was scoring long, deep shadows across the grounds.

Around the castle was the ocean of trees that was the Forest of Arcturus, and beyond that—ever so faintly visible, glinting at the horizon—was the actual ocean surrounding Luna Nova’s island. It was the ocean whose harsh currents, coupled with the monster-filled forest and sheer cliffs at all sides of the island, had rendered Luna Nova inaccessible for all except witches until the advent of the airplane. Even then, flying low enough over the trees to touch down on the campus’s clearing was a risky proposition at best, so really a nonmagical person was better off using a helicopter —

Tiff heard Croix clear her throat, and decided that she’d probably spent a little too much time daydreaming of geographical minutia. “Er… I don’t know? I see Luna Nova, I see the sun, I see… a lot of things. Can you be more specific?”

“Of course.” Professor Croix turned to face Tiffany in a way that swept her cape out handsomely. “What I see is the greatest place there is , if you’re looking to broaden your magical horizons.”

That was not more specific. “What?” Tiff tried not to sound annoyed, and was worried she failed, as she said, “I already tried creating new magic in Luna Nova. It’s not working.”

“Ah, but you’re not looking at the inside of Luna Nova, are you?” Croix winked. “I’m showing you the world . That’s where I learned to push my boundaries, anyway. Where I learned that theory is all well and good, but it doesn’t quite match up to practice. Not when you’re facing a magical monster born from atrocities in Angola, or hacking together a prototype magitronic at a hostel in
“Whoa…” Tiff let the word draw out to sound appropriately awed—it seemed like the right thing to do—even if she had no idea where Professor Croix was going with this.

“So here’s what I’m going to have you do.” Croix snapped her fingers. Simultaneously, three points of light appeared in Tiff’s vision: red flashes every second or so, like distant radio towers. She leaned forward, squinting and blocking the sun with her hand, and saw that the points of light seemed to form a right triangle… in fact, taken with the New Moon Tower, they formed a square. Or perhaps a baseball diamond.

“Now,” Croix continued, “what I’m going to have you do is, you need to—”

“Ride on my broom to each of the blinking lights in turn, and then come back here?”

“Oh, she catches on quickly!” Croix laughed. “No wand-magic at all, super simple flight. Think of it as a warm up exercise to get you out into the world. Put you in the right mindset, you know?”

Tiff squinted again. She wasn’t certain about the distances, but it looked like each leg of the journey would be about a mile at most. “It doesn’t look like I’ll be seeing a lot of the world,” she murmured. Not to mention, she’d be on the Shooting Star….

“The world’s full of surprises.” Croix patted her on the back, or rather through the back. “Now come on. Carpe diem while there’s still some diem left to carpe, all right? And then you can come back and we can talk about it.”

“Fine. Let’s fly, Scarlette.”

At those words, Scarlette beamed and mounted the Star. Tiffany mounted it behind her, a little further back than she would if she were flying it solo—well, frankly, than if she were flying it at all. These days, with Scarlette conscious, flying the Star was less like being a pilot and more like being a passenger.

“Ready?” Scarlette said, eyes bright.

Tiff rolled her eyes. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Then let’s go!”

She kicked off, the Star floated, and they zoomed forward like a shot. The grass, the trees turned into blurs beneath them.

“You should have made her use a Metamorphie Vestesse,” Scarlette yelled back at her, just loud enough to be heard over the rush of air. “Then we’d really get some speed!”

“I’m sure Professor Croix would have done that if it was important for the exercise.” Tiff sighed, stretching her arms. They were halfway to the first light anyway, this was gonna take about a minute—

Scarlette barrel rolled, fast and hard enough that Tiffany nearly lost her legs’ grip on the broom. “What the hay was that?” she yelped, grabbing the Star tight with both hands.

“Some sort of energy just shot at us!”

Tiffany’s eyes widened. “From where?”
“Not sure! Hang on!”

The next time, she saw it in her peripheral vision: a red blast of light that zoomed by. Scarlette dodged it easily, barely losing any speed as they neared the first checkpoint. Tiff looked around frantically, trying to see what was going after them: some kind of monster from the Forest of Arcturus, maybe? Goodness knew there were all kinds of monsters in there, and maybe one of them shot magic at witches who were just minding their own business and not bothering anyone?

“What’s going on?” Tiffany asked, as they reached the checkpoint. This close, she was able to see that each of the red flashes was coming from one of Croix’s droids. Not knowing what else to do, Tiff tapped the droid with her hand, and was rewarded when the next blink of the light was green. Then she found herself veering off to the side, as more blasts nearly grazed them. “Yeow! Are we safe?”

“Oh, they can’t touch me.” Scarlette snorted, rolling her eyes with her whole head. “This is simpler than that time I flew around the forest next to Woody, and we—” And then she clutched her forehead, screamed, “Agh!” and vanished.

“Scarlette?” Tiff said. And then the Shooting Star started falling. “Scarlette? You in there?”

The Star was slowly pointing toward the ground, and Tiffany felt it tipping over like it wasn’t a broom at all, just an unusually aerodynamic painted stick. “No, what?” She yanked herself forward on the broom, assuming a standard riding position, and pulled at the neck as hard as she could, but the broom refused to go up. “What is with you?” The grassy surfaces of Luna Nova’s courtyard were approaching, and the Shooting Star still wasn’t cooperating! It was like the broom wasn’t—

Insight hit her in a flash, and thankfully it hit before the ground did. “Tia freyre!” she yelled, and the Shooting Star finally blasted upward like a rocket, maybe fifty feet at most from the ground. She’d been pulling too hard, in fact, and the broom almost stalled out before she eased it into a more manageable climb, and took a moment to get her bearings.

All right. The Shooting Star had fallen to the floor the last time that Scarlette had had one of these… magic memory migraines, or whatever they were? So apparently, they disrupted her enough that the Shooting Star turned from the most amazing, impossible, and self-propelled broom ever into just a broom. That made sense. She could work with that, and she could fly the rest of this course. Just as long as—

Something flashed in her peripheral vision, and she acted before thinking, rolling under the shaft of the broom as another lance of energy blasted overhead.

Right. That.

Tiff swung herself back over the top of the broom, leaned forward, and accelerated until she felt her cheeks trying to depart her face. After all, if she couldn’t simply outspeed whatever was attacking her, then what was the point exactly of having the fastest broom in the world? In a fit of pique, she turned around and stuck out her tongue—

Just in time to see more blasts of light coming from the treeline. From multiple points in the treeline.

“Are you kidding me?” she said, and jerked the Star into a turn so sudden that some of the blood left her brain for a moment. When it came back, she hadn’t been hit yet, but more attackers seemed to have joined the party, and party was starting to sound like an accurate description with how
much light was flying through the air. More like a rave, even. Tiffany stopped thinking and let
instinct take over: she bobbed, she weaved, and she dodged like a champion.

She also was not making much progress, she noticed. With a growl, she aimed her broom skyward
and soared. Anything trying to get at her now would have to shoot much further, she’d have more
time to react, and she’d be able to dive down to the checkpoints when it was convenient for her.
Piece of cake!

This thinking lasted about until she reached the apex of her climb, and looked down to see that her
attackers were leaving the treeline. Moreover, that they were—“What?” she gasped, seeing a
veritable army of Croix’s drones exiting the treeline, each one blasting like mad.

No time to think about that now. She dove like a madwoman and spun like a ballerina as she
approached the second checkpoint, and for every dozen droids she left in her dust, another dozen
emerged from the forest ahead of her. She slapped the second checkpoint, going fast enough that it
made her hand sore, and skidded into a turn that made the blood in her head go down to her shoes
—

A blast struck Shooting Star. It didn’t hit hard, but it was enough to shake it out of Tiff’s control.
She skidded further through the air than she meant to, gripping her broom like it was a bucking
bull, and tried to will it forward. Come on, where was Scarlette now that Tiff really needed her?

She regained control, and zoomed forward at the third checkpoint, but by now she was low over
the trees—and when a droid rose from the forest in front of her, she didn’t have time to react. The
nose of the Shooting Star smashed into the droid, pulverizing it in an instant, but the shock of
impact wrenched Tiffany’s arms and legs from the shaft, sending her flipping forward over the
point of collision. She spun through the air, not knowing which way was up, only knowing that she
was falling —

“Whoa whoa whoa!”

A bubble of energy ballooned around her, halting her momentum before she could crash into the
trees. She took a few moments to let her inner ear stabilize—thankfully, years of learning to fly had
rendered her sense of balance pretty resilient—and then looked out to see that the bubble holding
her was projected from yet another of Croix’s droids, and Professor Croix’s hologram stood atop it.
“Are you okay?” she called out, in a voice that sounded close to panicked.

“Professor?” Tiff replied woozily, and then clamped a hand over her mouth, trying not to vomit.
All right, maybe her sense of balance wasn’t that resilient, but in her defense she had been flipping
really fast.

Professor Croix flew her—and the Shooting Star, also contained within the bubble—down to the
nearest part of the Luna Nova clearing. Then she released the bubble, letting Tiffany stand
somewhat unsteadily on her feet. “You are okay, aren’t you?” Croix repeated, zooming over to her
side. “My relationship with the faculty probably wouldn’t survive me putting a student in the
hospital wing.”

Tiff heaved breaths. At length, the swirling in her inner ear slowed to a stop. The swirling questions
in her head, on the other hand, showed no signs of slowing down any time soon. “You attacked
me?” she gasped.

“You were never in any danger.” Croix pressed two fingers to the middle of her forehead and
sucked in a breath. “In theory, anyway. Theory versus practice… but the shots were harmless and
the droids were ready to catch you, like they did, if you were in danger of falling.”
“You attacked me!” Tiff’s jaw dropped. “Why did you attack me!”

“I don’t know? To push you?”

“Push me?”

“Push you to be creative! To think outside of the literal box of the exercise!” Professor Croix held her arms out. “I don’t know, maybe you could have turned yourself invisible or used magic to pull the checkpoints to you instead of having to go to them! Or maybe you could have just fought back.”

“You said no wand-magic!”

“And you listened?”

“Of course I listened! You’re a teacher!”

“And how is that a good enough reason when you’re being attacked by a drone army!”

Tiff stared at Professor Croix, and Professor Croix stared back at Tiff. After a few seconds, it was Professor Croix who looked away, and took some deep breaths. “You know what?” she said. “This was stupid. This was a bad plan, and I shouldn’t have done it, and I apologize. I thought that putting you through an overwhelmingly stressful situation would force you to grow….” She snorted. “Gosh, I wonder who I got that from.”

Tiffany cocked her head to the side, but before she could ask, Croix looked back at her. “Okay, listen.” She sat down, putting her at Tiffany’s eye level. “What I can tell you is that magic wasn’t ever something I created for its own sake. Which I guess may have been some of the problem, looking back… not that we need to get into that—I’m rambling, sorry. The point is, I never woke up in bed and said to myself, ‘golly, I should create some new magic today.’ There was always a larger goal, always an objective.”

She hovered closer, and her gaze softened. “This project you’ve been working on, you’re coming at it from the perspective of just trying to create anything, isn’t that right? It makes sense that you wouldn’t even know where to start. So ask yourself: what is the purpose of the magic that you’re creating? What is your goal? What do you want?”

Tiffany looked at the ground. “I want my friends not to leave me this time.”

Croix kept looking at her, and then finally sighed. “Then you’re asking the wrong person for advice, Tiffany. I’m sorry I wasn’t very helpful.”

With another sigh her hologram disappeared, leaving the drone to fly away.

Tiff collapsed to the ground. Not all the way collapsed, since it was cold and wet, but she felt the mud squelch against her legs, her socks, her boots. It felt only marginally worse than she herself did.

She lost track of time for a little while there, just watching the sunset by its shadows—each blade of grass darkening more and more, and the pall of the forest extending slowly toward her. Finally, however, her reverie was broken as the Shooting Star shivered. After a few seconds of this, it rose unsteadily off the ground, like it was being picked up by a senior citizen who wasn’t all there. In a way, she supposed it was.

“Ow,” was the first word she heard. Scarlette’s form flickered on, one hand holding the Shooting
Star and the other clutching at her forehead. “Wow, that memory was really missing… hey, what happened? Why’s it feel like I got trampled by an elephant? Where are we?” She turned from side to side, gradually letting go of her head. “Did we crash?”

Tiff winced as Scarlette rounded on her, leaning down. “Did you just crash the best broom in the world?”

“Scarlette, leave me alone—”

“Just so you know, the broom’s my body too! So please don’t crash it!” Scarlette stomped her foot.

“Ugh, what is your deal? I thought you were good at flying!”

“Scarlette,” Tiff started to say, “please, I can’t deal with this right now—”

Scarlette sighed and crossed her arms, tapping her foot in exaggerated fashion. “Well, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” She snorted. “You had me helping you against that crippled girl, back in that broom race, but you still came second. Guess you’re not that gifted of a flyer after all.”

Something in Tiffany’s head went snap, like a piano wire whose key had been smashed too many times. She looked up at Scarlette’s stupid, juvenile, smirking face, and for the first time it struck Tiffany, it really struck her, that right now Scarlette wasn’t an olde witch in any sense of the word. She looked twelve, and she acted twelve. She was twelve.

So how should you treat a little prick of a twelve year old?

Scarlette was turning away. Tiffany stood up, stalked forward, grabbed Scarlette by the shoulders, and spun her around bodily. Scarlette’s eyes widened. “Hey, what the—”

“I have had it with you,” Tiff hissed. “Stop acting like you’re better than everyone else. Stop acting like you’re better than me! Because the way I see it, I can—” she bent down, and yanked at some grass until it pulled out in a clump, soil attached, and held it out in front of Scarlette’s face “—pick up things, and I can talk to people, and I can find the missing parts of you so you can talk! You need me! So stop being like this!”

Scarlette’s eyes were wide for a few seconds more, before she took the Shooting Star and used it to shove Tiffany hard in the chest, pushing her away. “No, that’s what you think! But—but you need me! Because if I’m not here, then what are you?” She sat on the Star, rising higher above Tiff’s head. “Not special, not important, just some kid! Well, I’m Scarlette, and I’m one of the Nine Olde Witches!”

She snorted and turned away. “Go be ordinary on your own!”

And just like Croix had, her hologram evaporated as she flew away. Tiffany watched her going, feeling angry tears welling up—

“Tiff! What was that?”

She looked down. Char and Mani were walking toward her from the school. Specifically, Mani was half-jogging while Char trailed behind her, so obviously Mani arrived first. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah? Yeah.” Tiff wiped her eyes. “Why, uh, why wouldn’t I be okay?” Her voice hitched even as she said it. Stupid vocal cords.

“Mate, like half the school saw that light show.” Char arrived at last, kneeling down alongside the other two. “And only one person I know turns into a red blur when she rides a broom. What the
“Well, happened?” Mani bent down next to her, so that they were all face to face.

Tiff sucked in a breath. Gosh, what hadn’t happened? Like a crowd getting crushed as they tried to escape through a narrow door, a hundred explanations collided with each other at her lips: how she’d tried to work on the project, how Croix had put her through a crazy obstacle course, how apparently even Scarlette didn’t want to talk to her anymore—

Before she knew what was happening, she was leaning in and grabbing the two of them in a tight hug.


“Sorry,” Tiffany said in a wet voice, “I just…. ” She sniffled. “I’ve been having a lot of trouble with this project. I just…. ” I don’t want you two to leave me, she didn’t say. Her tongue felt leaden as she trailed off, leaving her unable to speak the crucial bit.

“Yeah. I can tell.”

Tiff pulled away. She looked at the two of them, and then she saw Char glance at Mani, and Mani glance at Char. Before she could say anything about it, Mani said, “Char?”

“Yeah, Mani?”

“Have you been helping her with this at all?”

“Nope. Have you?”

“I’ve been… distracted.” Mani grimaced, and then turned to face Tiff fully. “That’s not very fair, is it?”

It was amazing, really, how much less big and empty the library could feel with just two more people.

“Okay, I’ve got one,” Char said. She was still leaning back in her seat, and still had her legs up on the table. The difference was, this time, she was holding a book over her face. Yes, it was close enough to her face that Tiff couldn’t really believe she was reading it, but still. “Let’s just, like, mash up two of these spells. Like, I dunno. Easy stuff. Foraen mugrowna and… murowa.”

“Foraen murowa.” Tiff pursed her lips. “So murowa but it only works on… plants.”

“Still different, right?”

“I don’t know if our teachers want us to use magic for killing things in the presentation.”

Mani, sitting to her right, groaned. “But do you have a better idea?”

Tiff sighed. “Fine. Hang on…. ” She stood up, trotted over to the window, and pointed her wand out at the grounds. “Veni.” A few seconds later, a clump of grass flew into her waiting hand. She trotted back and plopped it on the table. “Hey,” she said, looking from side to side as a worrying thought struck her, “this doesn’t count as stealing school property, does it?”
“God, wouldn’t it be hilarious if it did?” Char snorted. “All right, let’s do it.”

Tiff pointed her wand at the grass: it wasn’t exactly in the fullest, lushest part of the season, but it still seemed to have some life in it. It almost felt wrong, extinguishing that life, but hey—it was just grass, right? “Foraen… murowa?”

Exactly zero light came out of her wand. If she listened real close, she could swear she heard a sound come out the end, like the world’s smallest fart. It could have been her imagination, but on the other hand, why exactly would she imagine a fart?

Char giggled. “You spellcasting over there, or just spellasking? Lemme try.” She pulled her legs off the table, letting herself rock forward, and lifted her wand. “Foraen murowa.”

A sickly green light came out of her wand, and before Tiffany’s very eyes, the grass started to wilt.

“All right!” Mani leaned in, beaming. “We have got something!”

Char smiled too, and flicked her wand up to end the spell. However, now that Tiffany looked, it didn’t seem to have done much. The grass had already been pretty yellow, so the additional yellowing from Char’s magic wasn’t much. “That’s definitely good,” Tiff said, “but how about we shelve this one for the moment? I mean, I bet we can come up with something way better if we keep going.”

“Hey, just have Mani cast it.” Char shrugged. “She could probably, like, kill the Jennifer Tree with that.”

Mani squirmed at that. “How about we don’t get Mani to kill things,” Tiff said in a low tone, “and try to come up with another idea. I mean, this one’s a little obvious. Murowa even sounds like mugrowna.”

“So obvious that you didn’t come up with it,” Char grumbled, but she grabbed her book and got back to work regardless.

Silence fell over the table for a little while, except it wasn’t really silence. Tiffany had her notebook out, and was taking notes as she read. Mani was turning pages, and the sound of Char’s breathing—almost a snore—provided a regular cadence to the whole ambiance. It was nice, the same kind of nice white noise as a crackling fire might be. It felt like home.

It felt like belonging.

Tiff sucked in a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut. Scarlette really hadn’t known what she was talking about with Mani and Char, had she?

“Hey,” Char said, and she leaned forward again. “I’ve got one that might work. Gimme your notebook?”

Tiff gladly pushed it across the table, along with the pencil she’d been using. Char grabbed both and jotted some words down. “All right,” she said, spinning the notebook around and passing it back. “Try this.”

The handwriting wasn’t exactly great, forcing Tiff to squint. There were the letters SAH, and then a plus sign, and then GAHNDIES—presumably fragments of two spells that Char had found in her book, but they weren’t ringing any bells for Tiff. “What is this supposed to do?” she asked, taking her wand again.
“We’ll see, won’t we? Give it a shot.”

“All right.” Tiffany stood up, and pointed her wand down at the table, and said, “Sah gahndies.”


“Sah gahndies?”

“Like you mean it!”

“SAH GAHNDIES!” Tiff yelled.

Nothing happened. Char looked her in the eye and said, “Sah gahndies nutz, yo.”

Tiff blinked. “What?”

Next to her, Mani exploded into giggles, collapsing forward onto the table. “Wait,” Tiff said, turning to her. “Did Char say something funny? Did I… I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Oh my god.” Now the corners of Char’s mouth were twitching up. “Mate, do you not get it? Do you really not get what just happened?”

“Tiff,” Mani wheezed, “English isn’t my first language and I still get that. How do you not get it?”

Char was openly grinning now, and seemed to be trying very hard not to laugh.

“Well…” Feeling like she was going to regret this, Tiff leaned closer to Mani and said, “All right, what’s so funny?”

Still shaking with giggles, Mani leaned close and told her.

Tiff’s eyes widened. “You!” she yelled, lunging forward across the table as Char fully collapsed into hysterics.

Alice watched from the balcony, crouching down so that only the top of her head was visible. Beneath her, Tiffany lay flat on the table, clawing fruitlessly at the air, because her friend Char had fallen backward to literally roll on the floor, laughing. The other friend, Mani, seemed to be trying her worst to hold Tiffany back, and was still shaking with obvious laughter, leaving Tiffany to shake with rage instead.

No, hang on: as Alice kept watching, even Tiffany’s rage turned to laughter. It sounded begrudging, but still earnest, like she knew when she’d been had. Eventually she reached out a hand to Char, and Char grabbed it, and Tiffany pulled her up. They all got back to work with hardly a pause, occasionally looking up from their books to talk to each other, or share ideas, or even just crack more jokes.

What was the secret sauce there? How exactly was it that Tiffany, of all people, was pulling off this ‘friendship with two weirdos’ thing—Tiffany, who was axiomatically a terrible friend—whereas Alice was failing?

She sighed, straightened up a bit, and pushed her scooter out of the library. Hopefully, Tiffany was too occupied with all of her brand new friends to notice.
It was getting late, and she’d already eaten dinner—and grabbed a few snacks for later, stashed in her scooter’s cubby—so there wasn’t really anything left to do that night but trundle her way back to the dorms. She yawned as she went: it had been a really long day, with no acupuncture needles in her back to give her a boost, and no encouraging partner to help carry her scooter up long staircases, but she’d done it.

Because it was fine. If Alice Gainesbury wanted a thing, there was nothing that anyone could do to stop her from getting that thing. Not even two of her roommates quitting on her and avoiding her for an entire twenty four hours.

At length she reached the stairs to the dorm, took one long look at them, and sighed: it was such a pain trying to get herself and the scooter up all those steps. She’d just about resigned herself to grabbing the scooter from the bottom and heaving it up one step at a time—when she noticed a slightly raised platform in the corner of the steps, and a pair of railings sticking up from the platform.

Alice wheeled her scooter around, pushed it and herself onto the platform, and then started with surprise: the platform was rising, carrying her and her scooter smoothly up the stairs like a chairlift. It moved at an easy walking pace and made a slight beeping sound. Alice grabbed the railings, smiling to herself. See? She could do this on her own.

The thought lasted her about until she reached the corridor with her team’s dorm. There were voices coming from inside. They didn’t sound happy.

Alice stopped a little ways away, fumbled her wand from her belt, and made a precise little wave as she whispered, “Subausculto.” Her attention was concentrated on a point just under the room’s light, so hopefully they wouldn’t be able to see the shimmering focus of the spell….

Bingo. After a few seconds of magical static, words started coming through. “… just don’t… what the problem is.”

That was Ximena. Alice held the wand up by her ear, twisting it in midair to find the best reception she could, and kept listening as Rain responded: “Are you kidding? You seriously see no problems here?”

“No. Not really.” Ximena’s voice was timid in the face of Rain’s aggression. It was like Alice was listening in on a bizarro parallel universe. “Should there be a problem? I mean, she has a condition. We should try to support her.”

“It’s not about her stupid condition!”

“Yes, it is!”

Rain let out a low groan. “Okay, dude. Um. Thought experiment time.” Alice heard movement, and imagined Rain was probably shifting around on her bed. “What if it was you? What if you had her CFS, and you were acting the way she does? All the time? Being a complete jerk, I’m talking total scuzz bucket here. Always demeaning us, always treating us like—”

“She’s not a bucket of scuzz!” Ximena’s voice got a little louder, but without gaining any confidence. “She’s just going through a lot, and we need to be there for her—”

“And she’s putting us through a lot!” A slap of flesh against flesh sounded in the room, and Alice was pretty sure it was Rain facepalming. “How are you not getting this—how do people normally treat you if this feels like….”
Silence, for several seconds. “Rain?” Ximena asked. “What are you looking at?”

“Shush. See that? I think she’s spying on us.”

Oh no.

Alice immediately squelched the magic and put the wand back in her belt. She briefly thought about trying to wheel away and hide, in case the door flew open and they confronted her… but there was no way she could get away quickly enough at this time of night. And the door wasn’t bursting open anyway, even after several seconds.

What the hell were they even talking about? Alice wasn’t treating them badly! All she was doing was accepting the help they were offering, and making sure they’d keep helping her. How was that bad at all?

Alice pressed her hand to her forehead, trying to fend off a headache even as she knew the effort was futile. Clearly it hadn’t even been worth eavesdropping at all.

And one of these days, she really had to come up with an invisible version of that spell.

Steeling herself, Alice pushed her scooter forward to the door, then awkwardly shoved it open. “Hey, girls,” she said.

No response. Ximena was on her top bunk, and Rain was in the solo bed, and they didn’t seem to have started talking again in the minute since they’d stopped. Ximena glanced down at Alice, looking absolutely miserable, then stared at the wall—meanwhile, Rain’s expression was unreadable.

“… made good progress on the project,” Alice said, staring at the floor. “We’re going to get a really nice grade.” She ducked under Ximena’s pull-up bar as she entered the room, and pushed her scooter to its usual spot next to her bottom bunk. “Though technically everyone’s supposed to contribute equally to it for the grade…”

No response. It felt like being in a library. Or a tomb.

“It’s supposed to be rainy tomorrow,” Alice tried, glancing at the other two. “But we won’t let that stop us from exercising, now will we?”

And finally, after a few seconds, there was something. “Ximena?” Rain said.

“Yes, Rain?”

“Could you get the light?”

“Um… okay.” Ximena poked her wand behind herself, and the magical light in the room shut off.

“Thanks, dude. Good night.”

Alice heard the movement of sheets above her, a little mutter of “Dude”, and then nothing but the overly measured breathing of someone trying to sleep but not there yet. It was the sound of avoidance, and Rain was making it too: when Alice glanced over, she saw that Rain had turned over in bed, showing nothing but her back.


And, ignoring the other two, she rolled into bed without bothering to find pajamas, and pulled the
sheets up to her eyes.

And it was fine, Alice reminded herself, staring at the top bunk in the near-silence. After all, she didn’t actually need them. They were nice friends to have and all, but when push came to shove, she knew how to be self reliant.

And as long as she kept telling herself that, she’d make it through this just fine.

“Oh, god,” Alice moaned the next morning. “My everything.”

It had been two days since the fight with Ximena and Rain—well, the fight with Rain, and Ximena somewhere in the middle. And right now, everything hurt.

Sucking in a breath, Alice forced herself to sit up and look to the left. Rain was snoring in her bunk bed, and Alice didn’t feel like she would be willing to do any acupuncture today. At least, Alice didn’t feel up to asking her.

Groaning as quietly as possible, Alice pushed herself out of bed and saw that Ximena’s bunk was empty. The bed had been made with her usual military precision, but Ximena must have gotten up even earlier than usual to avoid her.

Alice stifled a yawn and peeked out the window to see yet another gray, misty day. The kind where you wouldn’t get very wet if you stood still, but could drench yourself via lateral movement. Like, say, jogging.

Two days. And yesterday had been one of the frequent rest days Ximena imposed upon her, even if Ximena hadn’t done the imposing this time. That meant that today would be her first time running solo.

She grunted, pulled on some loose clothes, got on her scooter, and left the dorm.

The scooter rested along the side of the track, its wheels caked in mud just like Alice’s left shoe. Both her shoes made splattering noises against the soggy clay as she ran.

*Ignore the burning. Ignore the pain. Hell, enjoy the pain. Pain is good!*

She pounded against the track, keeping to the inside lane. She’d done one revolution already. Child’s play. She didn’t need a running mate.

*Keep the breaths steady. Ignore the muscles telling you to fast-track your air intake: they’re wrong.*

The mist was blessedly cool on her skin, counteracting the heat building up in every extremity. On the other hand, though, she kept having to wipe the slick moisture off her face. She gritted her teeth as she leaned forward into the turn.
Okay, I’m gonna speed up now, but just for a little while. Promise.

She pumped her arms harder, breathed deeper, inflated her chest further. Her legs protested more and more, and she didn’t listen to them. What did they know? She was the one with the brain: who were they to say she was having bad ideas?

All right, I lied about slowing down as I left the turn. But I promise I’ll ease it down after this straight part....

Her exhalations grew louder, and before long she was shouting with each breath out. Shouting encouragement to herself? Shouting resentment at everyone else in the world? It could have been either or both, she wasn’t really sure. Not like she was paying attention to the world: at this exact moment, the only things in her little universe were herself and the ground she walked on. It was all she needed.

OK, but can’t you keep it up into the turn? If you were real muscles....

She pushed herself hard, harder than she knew she could go, but it wasn’t so bad. As long as the tortured screams of her body were occupying her cogitation, she didn’t have the time for any other unpleasant thoughts. Wasn’t exercise fun?

I can do this! I don’t need anyone else with me! I can do this!

And then her leg went out from under her.

She gasped, and looked down, and saw herself flailing in muddy ground. Oh right. The puddle. Her arms spun like windmills in a gale, as if trying to grab onto some support, but there wasn’t any. She went down like a pratfalling comedian, face-first into the mush. She must have looked hilarious.

She moaned in discomfort, feeling the mud on her cheek, on her neck, all down her front. It was even more unpleasant than the burning from the scrapes on her knees. “Come on,” she muttered, trying to marshal her arms under herself, “you can do this, you’ve got enough in you, this is easy! You’ve got this!”

But that was the trouble with lying to yourself. Eventually, you always saw through it.

Alice let the tension leave her body, closed her eyes, and slumped into the mud. Whatever. As far as she was concerned, she might as well just lie here for the rest of the day, or week, or month. It wasn’t like she had any pressing social engagements, right? Who cared?

“It tripped me up too. Need a hand?”

She opened her eyes to see a hand being offered. At the end of the arm offering it was a red-haired woman in a tracksuit and glasses.

Alice took a few seconds to consider, but eventually she sighed, lifted her hand, and let Professor Chariot yank her to her feet. It was amazing, really, how Alice didn’t need to put in any effort at all. The woman could have grabbed her by the back of her shirt and held her like a briefcase.

“Thanks,” she muttered.

“Don’t mention it. Oh, hang on, you’re a bit scuffed up. Mind if I….” Chariot pulled out her wand, but hesitated.

“Yeah, whatever.”
Professor Chariot smiled, then aimed her wand at Alice’s face and started guiding it down. As the wand swept over her muddy front, the mud popped off Alice’s body as if magnetically attracted to a growing mudball that floated near the end of Chariot’s wand. Once she’d cleaned Alice’s shoes, Chariot flicked her wand over her shoulder, flinging the ball several yards away to splatter on the ground. Then she bent down to Alice’s bare, scraped knees, and murmured some kind of healing magic. Within a few seconds, the pain dimmed to almost nothing.

“Good as new! I mean, mostly.” Chariot stowed her wand in a pocket. Then she turned around and started stretching: grabbing her ankle and pulling it as close to her rear as it would go, then switching to the other leg. “I was actually going to go for a morning jog when I saw you. I’d love it if you joined me—I don’t get much company on these, usually—but if you’re done for the day then I understand.”

The smile she smiled back at Alice—just as considerate as her words implied, and yet with a hint of a challenge—was enough to make Alice reconsider being done. “All right,” she said, wishing her voice hadn’t chosen that moment to crack, “if you can keep up.”

“I’ll do my best,” Chariot said, and thankfully she didn’t laugh.

Once Professor Chariot was done with a short stretching regimen, and once Alice was done with her concurrent attempts to filter all the air in England through her lungs, they walked forward to a starting line that had been painted onto the clay. Chariot looked to Alice, and Alice nodded, and they set off.

And… it was easier than it had been before. Easier, and much much harder. With the teacher next to her, the multitude of tasks that running had been before (ignore pain in legs, ignore straining of lungs, keep breathing regular, put one foot in front of the other, maintain good pace, pump arms correctly) managed to coalesce into the single task of keeping up. Professor Chariot obviously wasn’t running as hard as she could, but it was perhaps a little faster than what Alice would consider an easy pace—yet pushing herself to stay next to Chariot came naturally. So that part was nice, especially with how the pair of them were halfway around the track before she noticed.

Less nice was how her mind was freed up to worry about all the things she’d wanted to stop thinking about. Things like Rain telling her she was the problem, and Ximena looking miserable, and over twenty four hours of not talking to anyone. It was worse than being in a hospital bed, because in the hospital bed at least the people weren’t ignoring her to her face.

Oh, there was wetness on her face again. She wiped away the mist, and then realized that the moisture between her eyes was unduly warm, and then she realized why exactly that was.

To hell with the run. Near the end of the lap, she slowed to a stop without crossing the line.

“Careful of the slippery part,” Chariot said, running a little past her, and then turning around and stopping. “Alice? Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” Alice said, and then realized how stupid of a thing that was to say. “No. No, I’m not. I hate this.”

Chariot approached and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Let’s sit down.”

Alice sniffled, and let Chariot guide her to the nearby bleachers. Before they sat, Chariot swept the water away from the wood with a wave of her wand, and then held it up like an umbrella to keep the rain away, just like Alice had done for Rain before. This time, it was big enough to cover two people.
She let herself collapse onto the seat, breathing heavily, and she wasn’t sure how much was from exertion and how much was from angry tears. She looked down at the grass, and tried to keep it in, until Professor Chariot put an arm around her shoulders.

That was when she broke down and just… cried. She cried, and hiccuped, and cried, and blew her nose, and cried some more. She cried until snot dripped down from her nostrils, until her throat was sore, until she couldn’t see through the tears, until her muscles ached more from the sobs racking her body than they had from the run—and then she kept crying.

She didn’t know how long she cried. Minutes? Hours? But finally she felt spent, and maybe a little less pent-up. She wiped her face with her sleeve, cleaning up as much as she could, and looked up at Professor Chariot.

The woman’s expression was neutral, and she didn’t seem inclined to force a conversation. Her presence had certainly made it easy to cry, and Alice was grateful for that—but now, she didn’t know what to say. And something, she was pretty sure, needed to be said.

Eventually, between deep breaths, Alice settled on, “Have you been… putting ramps around everywhere? And stairlifts?”

Chariot nodded, smiling a little. “I hope they’ve been helpful. I think I’ve gotten most of the building by now, but let me know if there’s anywhere I should prioritize.”

“Thanks.” Alice sniffled, and then let out a shaky laugh. “Wow, the great Shiny Chariot running around a school satisfying disability requirements. That feels like it’s got to be a step down, right?” Before Chariot could respond, Alice frowned, and said, “Pun not intended.”

“Pun?”

“You know… step down? Ramps?”

“Oh. It’s… not very funny.”

“It’s not funny at all. Puns are terrible.”

Silence fell awkwardly once again, like it had tripped and faceplanted on the ground.

“You know,” Chariot said, sliding a little closer, “if you want to talk about anything other than puns, you certainly can.”

Alice sighed. “Thanks. But… I don’t know if you’d get it.” She looked down at the grass again. “Actually, I’m pretty sure you definitely wouldn’t.”

“Oh?” That was a voice that sounded like the owner had raised an eyebrow. “And why wouldn’t I?”

“Because you’re Shiny Chariot. You’re a household name, you’ve got merchandise with your face all over it, you performed worldwide, as far as I know you’re pretty much the greatest witch who’s ever lived—I mean, aren’t you part of that whole Nine New Witches thing with the Grand Triskelion?”

“How did you even hear about—” Chariot wiped her forehead. “I wish Akko hadn’t come up with that name. It’s a bit much.”

“Not for you! You’re the most famous witch in history!” Alice turned to her, her hands in fists. “So
no, you wouldn’t get it! Why would you get what it’s like to be some… some broken idiot loser who wants to do something and she just can’t do it, no matter how hard she tries? What do you know about being broken when no one can see?"

She breathed out heavily. She really hadn’t meant to shout like that, but come on. Why would Shiny Chariot know anything about—

“Try not to tell anyone, but I can’t fly.”

Alice blinked. She squinted up at Chariot. After a second of poring through old memories, she said, “Yes you can.”

“I promise I can’t.”

There was a glint in Professor Chariot’s eye, which Alice did her best to ignore. “No, I’ve seen you fly. I mean, not in person, but….” She glanced at the ground again. “Sesame Street,” she grumbled.

“Mm?”

“I saw you on Sesame Street when I was a really little kid and you were flying, okay?”

Chariot blinked a few times, and then her face broke out in a grin. “Oh my gosh, I almost forgot about that! For the episode about witch awareness they did, and there was a whole song about how people shouldn’t discriminate against witches, and I got to meet Big Bird—”

“Yeah,” Alice said, a grin growing on her own face, “and you let him fly on your broom with you, because he’s a flightless bird—”

They spoke the next bit together: “—and he always wanted to fly!” And then they laughed together.

“Gosh, it’s been forever since I thought about that.” Chariot smiled like a second sun peeking through clouds, chuckling to herself. Eventually the laughter faded, though, and the smile dimmed. “Yeah, I could fly back then. I had an accident recently, though, and… it’s a long story, but I can’t fly anymore. I just don’t seem to have the knack. Guess that makes me the flightless bird now, huh?”

She sighed, and looked off into the distance. Off into the clouds, really. “I didn’t expect to, but… I miss it, a lot more than I thought I would. I miss flying through leylines without hitching a ride. I miss showing my students the ropes… I miss the wind in my hair.” She closed her eyes and took a breath.

Alice just stared up at her. After a few seconds, when it felt like something needed to be said, she managed, “I’m sorry.”

“Hm.” Chariot, her smile renewed, shook her head a little. “No, don’t be, it’s not that bad. It’s certainly easier than the anxiety.”

“The what?”

“Oh, yeah, another inside scoop about the great Shiny Chariot for you.” Chariot opened her eyes and glanced down at Alice. “I used to have terrible anxiety before shows.”

“Ohhhhh, so, just anxiety as in stage fright.”
“I thought so too, but no. Anxiety as in the diagnosable medical condition.”

Alice shut up.

“I had to cancel shows sometimes, near the end of my career. Last minute, out of the blue, just… couldn’t do it. I was panicking too hard.” Chariot sighed. “Which didn’t exactly help the career, which didn’t help the anxiety, and so on. By the very end it felt like I was pushing through a panic attack every time I tried to go out on the stage. Not that I knew that’s what it was at the time, I just was wondering why I kept throwing up.”

She snorted. “You know, there’s a therapist in France who got to be one of the few people who knew what had happened to the great Shiny Chariot. I hope he’s doing well, it’s been years since I had to see him.”

She looked back down at Alice, winked, and put a finger to her lips.

Alice stared dumbly back. “I,” she started, and then floundered for a few seconds, feeling her hands fidget. “I didn’t know.”

“No. You didn’t.” The words themselves could have been cold, except that Chariot kept that same warm look, that same understanding tone. Alice wasn’t sure if that made it better, or so, so much worse. “I hope you understand that there’s a bit of a contradiction in what you said. If I’m ‘broken’ but no one can see, then how can you see it to know whether I’m ‘broken’?”

Okay, she’d figured it out. It was so much worse. “I’m sorry,” she whimpered, burying her face in her hands from sheer mortification. Ideally her face wouldn’t come out until February, when she’d decide whether or not she could see her shadow.

But Chariot’s hand was on her shoulder again. “Alice,” she said, “everyone’s fighting their own battles. You deserve a little slack for the ones you’re dealing with. But don’t assume that other people are doing fine, just because you can’t see what’s going on with them.”

Alice nodded without excavating her head from its buried position. Then she splayed her fingers a little, letting one eye peek through.

I wish I was like you, with your zero problems in life whatsoever.

She grimaced behind her hands, a grimace so deep she felt it strain her neck.

It’s not the project, dude. It’s you.

Oh.

Alice sunk in on herself with a small, defeated sigh. “Alice?” Chariot said.

“I think I screwed up big-time,” Alice said into the palms of her hands.

“All right.” Chariot’s hand patted her shoulder again. “What are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know.” She peeked up at Chariot. “I think I need some help.”
"Shiny Chariot was on Sesame Street" is probably the best headcanon I have ever come up with in my life, for this or any other fandom.

Also, I have more art to share!

It's Tiffany, as depicted by the talented P4ntry-D3m0n! Thanks again for the art, Pan!
“So!” Professor Chariot said, her hands clasped and her smile nervous. “I suppose I don’t need to do introductions?”

They were all sitting in an otherwise empty classroom. Chariot was at the head of a rectangular table. Alice was on one side. Rain and Ximena were on the other side. Rain’s gaze upon Alice was so intense that Alice was surprised it didn’t melt holes through her glasses, whereas Ximena was looking off to the side, miserable as ever.

Alice squirmed.

“All right. Silly question.” Chariot looked at one side of the table, then the other. “And it’s clear to everyone, roughly, why we’re here, right? You don’t have to say yes, you can just nod.”

Alice nodded. So did Rain and Ximena.

“Good. Well, I guess I should explain my role.” Professor Chariot leaned forward. “I’m gonna try to stay neutral, and make sure the discussion stays productive—I mean, assuming it needs my help at all. Ideally, I’ll be able to keep a light touch and just let you three work it out. If you need my help, I’m available, but otherwise, I’m not even here.” She nodded. “So. Shall we?”

Silence fell upon the room. Alice squirmed in her seat again, looked at her two friends, and wondered what in the name of the Nine Olde Witches to say.

Seriously, what the hell? Why was it so difficult to open up with ‘I’m sorry, now please tell me what I did wrong’? She’d said it in her head a hundred times, as Chariot had been collecting Rain and Ximena to have this meeting—but now, in the moment, the words shriveled and died on her tongue. They felt stupid, inadequate, even actively harmful.

What was she supposed to say, when she wasn’t even sure what had gone wrong?

Chariot, eventually, cleared her throat. “If it would help, I could… let’s see here….” To Alice’s mild horror, she reached down, lifted a book with Mediation for Beginners printed on the spine in big friendly letters, and read aloud: “Start the discussion off with some leading questions—”

“You were eavesdropping on us last night,” Rain snapped. “Weren’t you.”

Alice flinched. “Yeah. A bit. I mean, it’s my room too—” she caught herself, and let out a little, “Sorry. That was bad.”

“Yeah, it was bad. So why’d you do that?” Rain leaned closer, over the table.

“Well, because, the thing is….” Alice’s jaw clenched. She’d recited spells that took thirty seconds to say, she could do it in her sleep, and yet these normal English words seemed to stick in the craw like fishbones from a faulty fillet.

“Because?” Rain leaned closer, glowering.

“Rain,” Ximena muttered, “be nice—”

“Because I don’t know what I did wrong.”

Rain’s eyes widened. “What.”
Alice took a deep breath, and all of a sudden the words were flowing. “I know I screwed up. I’m sorry. But I don’t know what I did. I don’t know why you’re mad at me. I really wanna know what I did to make you so mad at me, please don’t be mad at me, I still wanna be friends, I’m really sorry.”

She stopped. The tension was broken, at least—it was like getting blood taken, where the moments before the needle went in were the scariest. Now, things could flow.

“You don’t know.” Rain looked off to the side. “You don’t— you said all that stupid stuff, and you don’t even know—you don’t even know!” She slammed her hands on the table. “Are you kidding me?”

“Rain,” Chariot murmured, “I understand you’re upset, but—”

“I mean, you’ve been treating us like garbage for the last week and you don’t even—”

“Rain, calm down—”

“Seriously, what the hell is wrong with you—”

“Rain!”

The shout echoed through the room. All eyes moved to Chariot, who had stood suddenly, and Alice realized all at once that she’d never appreciated how burning red Chariot’s eyes were. She paused for a second, breathing in. “Rain,” she said, in a voice that carried without having to be so loud, “Alice came here to talk to you because she’s not sure what she did wrong, and she was hoping you could tell her. Please don’t blow up at her for that.”

Rain took deep breaths, staring at the table. “Okay. You don’t know. I guess I should have figured.” She scratched her head, then looked up at Alice. “You seriously don’t even want to guess what the problem is? You don’t wanna give it a shot?”

Alice glanced off to the side. Trying to think of what she might have done was way harder than creating a new Grand Triskelion. Maybe she could turn this agonizing experience in for a grade. “I guess I said something stupid. Something about trying to get you to do the project, even though you… didn’t want to do the project, or something like that? No?”

Rain’s expression didn’t change. Alice winced. “Look, if you don’t want me to be your friend anymore, just tell me, okay—”

“There! Right there!”

Alice recoiled, because Rain jabbed a finger at her. “That’s the problem! Exactly that! You just did it again, you freaking insecure—you—ugh—” She was sputtering, choking, and only quieted down a little when Chariot shot her a look. Rain sucked in a huge breath through her teeth, and said, “I do wanna be your friend, dude!”

Alice’s mouth hung open a bit.

“I do! But every freaking day you’re acting like I don’t! You’re always saying stuff like, oh, if I was really your friend I’d do this or that or bend over backwards for you. ‘Are you up for this? You got a problem with that?’ Like, every half hour it’s a purity test! I’m sick of it!” Rain’s teeth were clenched, and her eyes were red. “I’m sick of feeling like I’m one mistake away from getting, like, friend-disowned! Like—like—”
She let out a long groan, pulling at her hair, and Alice couldn’t help but be reminded of someone else. “I don’t want things to be awful between us, dude,” Rain finally said, each word coming slowly as if it were carefully chosen. “I want to be your friend. Stop making it so hard.”

Alice stared, slack-jawed. “I… I didn’t realize,” she whispered.

“Well. Now you realize.” Rain crossed her arms and looked away.

Alice couldn’t talk for a few seconds—way more than a few seconds. It might have been as much as half a minute before she found her voice again. “Ximena,” she said, turning to her other friend, “do I really do that?”

Ximena, for the first time all day, looked at her. “No? Maybe, yeah? I dunno.” She seemed to be having as much trouble talking as Alice, and just as quickly as she’d looked at Alice, she looked away. “I just want to be friends again.”

A bit of irritation flickered in the back of Alice’s mind at that. If she couldn’t even get a straight answer, how was she supposed to get better? But she couldn’t say that, and she didn’t know what else to say, either… so the silence returned. Ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty—

“So,” Chariot said, and Alice jumped in her seat. True to her word, Chariot had seemed to vanish for a little while there. Kind of embarrassing, how startling it was to hear her start talking again. “Alice, it sounds like your actions are coming from a place of feeling… a little insecure about your friendship. Would you like to talk about that?”

Alice stared at her. “I’m not insecure,” she said, feeling a blush on her cheeks.

“Dude,” Rain muttered.

“Well, suppose for a moment that you were.” Chariot’s gaze was level. Not angry, but insistent. “Why would that be?”

“Oh, I dunno. I guess it would probably be because I used to have one friend, one best friend, and then she stopped caring about me. And I guess she did that because….” Alice looked down at the table. “Because I’m useless.”

“Alice,” Ximena said, “you’re not—”

“I am useless. I need a bunch of pins in my back to get through a day, I’ve got you two working overtime just to help me and I still feel useless. Why else would she have just, just drifted away? And I’m still like that. I’m still….”

She forced herself to look up at Rain and Ximena. It was tough, because her eyes were all blurry. “I don’t want to stop being friends. But I feel like it’s gonna happen again anyway. Because I’m me.” She sniffled, sucking in a breath through her nose. “Maybe that’s why I was saying all those things. I’m sorry.” She wiped her eyes. “Please still be friends with me.”

After a few seconds—a few horrible, agonizing seconds which she’d rather have spent running over hot coals—Rain smiled. “Dude, chill already. I already said I wanted to be friends. And I’m pretty sure this dude wants to be too—”

She gestured to Ximena, but then stopped talking. Ximena still looked uncomfortable. “Hey, dude?” Rain said, turning her chair a little to look at Ximena. “Is something still bad?”

“It’s fine.” Ximena wasn’t looking at her.
Everyone’s fighting their own battles. Alice leaned toward Ximena and said, as quietly as she could, “Ximmie? If something’s wrong, can you please tell me? If I did something, I want to know.”

Ximena wasn’t looking at her either. She was trembling. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Dude,” Rain said, “do you still have a problem with Alice—”

“Stop calling me dude!”

Rain blinked.

“¿En serio? You don’t want people to call you dude but you call everyone else dude even though none of them are dudes! Stop it!” Ximena’s eyes were clenched shut as her words fled her mouth in a rapid patter. Her whole body was preemptively flinched away from Rain, and she clutched her left arm.

Rain stared at her for a few seconds, then nodded. “Okay.”

Ximena’s eyes opened. “Wait, really?”

“Uh, yeah, du—Ximena.” Rain shook herself. “Wow. Bad habit. But yeah, I’m sorry I didn’t notice it was bothering you, and I’ll try to stop. Is dudette okay?”

Ximena stared at her like she couldn’t quite believe Rain was real. “Um… it is, yes.” Her fingers slowly loosened from around her left arm. Alice laughed, and couldn’t quite figure out what was funny. Maybe it was just the breaking of the tension.

“Awesome.” Rain looked at Alice once more. “So… yeah. Apology accepted, I guess. Are we done here?”

That last question was directed not at Alice but at Chariot, who smiled genuinely in response. Alice still spied a little tension, but as she took Mediation for Beginners off the table, she seemed a lot less stressed than before. “I think that you’ve all done a really good job of communicating openly and honestly with each other. So, yes, you’re nearly done. I just want you all to say something you’re going to try to do for your friends, going forward. Alice?”

All eyes went to her, and Alice nodded. “Well, I’m going to try not to do that insecurity stuff anymore. I’m going to trust you two more.”

Rain smiled. “Thanks, du… dette. Yeesh.” She shook her head. “I have to figure out how to break the ‘dude’ habit, apparently? And I’ll let you know if you’re ever being a jerk before we have to go through this whole thing again.” She glanced to her side. “Ximmie?”

Ximena’s lips were clamped shut for a few seconds, but she eventually managed, “Uh, what Rain said.” She paused. “About letting you know if I’m annoyed. Not the dude thing.”

“Okay, good job!” Professor Chariot wiped her forehead with her hand, then pulled out her wand and pointed it at her wrist. A spectral clock face appeared on her wrist, as if she were wearing a ghostly watch. “Oh, shoot. I’m going to be late for combat practice. Um, girls,” she said, standing up, “can you set the room back where it was when we got here? Thanks, I’ve got to go, bye!”

Before any of them could respond, Chariot was already running out of the room.

Ximena glanced around. “Did she say combat practice?”
Alice sighed. She shoved herself to her feet and, with a grimace settling comfortably onto her face, got her hands under one end of the table to lift—but Ximena was moving past her, leaning over the table to grab both sides, and saying, “Slow down, it’s okay. I’ve got this.”

“I want to help,” Alice said.

Ximena looked at her for a moment, then shrugged. “Well, all right.” She moved to grab the other end of the table, and together they moved it to the corner of the room where they had found it. Then Alice leaned on the table and panted for a few seconds.

This was good. This was nice. But…. “I guess we should talk about the elephant in the room,” she said, looking up from the tabletop.

Both her friends looked confused. Alice elaborated: “I mean, we need to figure out what our project is going to be, because you girls obviously don’t want to do the Triskelion thing, right? I mean, it’s okay, I’ve got like a jillion spells we can use instead—”

Rain snorted, cutting her off. “Dude.” She paused. “Ette. This is gonna take a while to get used to.” She shook her head before continuing, “What part of ‘the project is not the issue’ did you miss?”

As Alice processed that, Rain said, “Hold still, by the way.” Rain circled behind her, and then Alice heard something rush through the air, and felt a dozen tiny impacts on her back, like someone had splashed water against her. She craned her neck around to see Rain standing several feet away, and an array of acupuncture needles in her back.

Alice blinked. “How did you….?”

“Been practicing.” Rain smiled. “How’d I do?”

Alice rotated her shoulders, feeling the energy welling inside her. Then she frowned. “Did you just put a bunch of holes in my uniform?”

Rain’s smile wavered. “Back on topic. Dudette, you’re kind of a jerk about things sometimes—but your whole passion deal isn’t one of those things. It’s actually pretty great.” She walked around again, grabbing a chair in one hand on the way, and placed it against the wall near the opposite side of the table. “Like, really. It’s part of why I wanna be friends.”

It was hard to breathe without sniffling, all of a sudden. Alice wiped her nose. “Really?”

“Well, also it would suck not to be friends with your roommate, but yeah. Really.” Rain nodded at her, then glanced over at Ximena, who was grabbing the remaining chairs and stacking them. “Ximmie, you?”

“What? Yes, of course I want to!” Ximena set the chairs down on the one Rain had already placed. “It’s a wonderful idea. Even if it’s, um, a little impossible.”

Alice smiled wide. “That’s what makes it fun.”

And her friends smiled back.

Mani and Tiff were talking about something.
Char dawdled behind ‘em like usual as they walked to lunch, hands interlaced behind her head like a pillow. It was more stuff about the project Tiff was so up in arms about, so Char could tune most of it out and keep living in her cozy little world.

Not that she didn’t want Tiff to do well on the project. It was just….

“… just use something simple?” Mani seemed to be saying from the snippets Char caught (purely by mistake). “Why does… be so complex?”

Char let her eyes drift closed. The hallway was basically straight for another minute or so. She could let her feet go on autopilot.

“I don’t… you get this, but Char isn’t doing that well,” Tiff said, and Char’s eyes snapped resentfully open at the keyword. “If we do the simplest possible project, how is that supposed to get her grades back up?”

It was time to intervene. “Mates,” Char said, drifting forward a little to interpose herself between them. “I don’t care. Just do whatever’s gonna be easiest for you.”

“That’s not what I would call the objective of the exercise.” Tiff rolled her eyes.

“Well, so far you’re about as creative as a… something that’s not creative.” Char grimaced. Of all the times not to come up with a suitable analogy. “And Mani’s not exactly the queen of magic. So maybe we shouldn’t push it?”

“On the contrary, that sounds like exactly why we should push it!”

“Nah.” Char smiled. Or grimaced again. Whatever. “Don’t push yourself too hard, not over little old—”

Two hands planted themselves on Char’s back and started pushing.

Not trying to shove her to the ground, either. It felt like the kind of pushing you’d do to a heavy crate to scrape it across a floor. Char, being not quite as heavy as a heavy crate, found herself having to walk forward. “Whoa, what?”

“Sorry, you two,” said the voice behind her. “I need to borrow Char for a bit.”

“Akko?” Tiff said.

Oh, yeah, that was the voice. Char glanced back behind herself to see Akko pushing resolutely, and Tiff and Mani behind her looking dumbfounded. “Well,” Char said, waving, “guess I’ll see you two later?” She imagined her face looked at least half as baffled as theirs did.

“Akko—” Mani called out, but then she hesitated.

“Not now!” Akko yelled back, and then Char’s friends disappeared around a corner.

The pushing continued. Akko turned her around a second corner, toward a staircase, and up the staircase, and eventually Char had to ask, “I’m super confused, whuddafuh?”

“You guys were shouting really loudly the other day,” Akko said.

“The other day….”

“About your grades.”
“Oh.” Char found herself pushing back a little against Akko. “Is the pushing necessary? I can just follow you.”

“Will you?”

Char considered this. “Might not.”

“Then yeah, it’s super necessary.”

Char sighed and resigned herself to being pushed. It was easier than the alternative, especially considering that for an apparently scrawny girl, the force coming from Akko’s hands was prodigious.

At last, after navigating up way too many staircases with a constant force behind her, they stopped. “Here,” Akko panted, shoving Char upright with one last push before removing her hands. She took some deep breaths. “We’re here.”

Char looked at the door. It didn’t have a label. For some reason, a lot of the doors in this stupid school didn’t think they needed to be labeled.

Apparently she must have been squinting or something, because Akko answered the question she hadn’t asked: “This is Professor Chariot’s office. Remember how you owe me a favor?”

Char blinked, looking back at her. After a few moments, she grumbled. “Oh, that tart wasn’t worth it, was it.”

“You think?” Akko smiled. “This school’s tarts are worth a lot.”

“Yeah, well, you said the favor would be nothing big—”

“It’s not.” Akko raised her hand to the door. “I want you to knock on this door. And then whatever happens, happens. If you and Professor Chariot have a really good conversation about how you’re doing at Luna Nova, or if she’s not in and you leave, then whatever.”

“Why are you bringing me here?”

“Because….” Akko looked pained here, as if she’d swallowed something that disagreed with her. “I can’t help everyone. I figured that out pretty recently. I’m not smart enough, and I’m not that good with magic yet anyway. But I am smart enough to know who to call.” She tilted her head toward the door.

Char groaned. “All right, smart girl, what if I say the favor has to be used on something else?” She started the laborious process of turning around.

“I guess you could do that, sure, but… could you give it a shot?” And here, Akko’s voice turned the exact right kind of beseeching: “For your big sis Akko?”

Oh, damn it, why did she have to go there? Char reversed her turn to see Akko staring at her, with eyes she couldn’t say no to. Before she could do anything about it, though, Akko nodded and said, “See you later.” Then she turned and dashed away.

Char sighed. Then she turned to face the door—one which didn’t really seem like it should have been that intimidating, and yet—and impelled her hand on its epic quest, from its position by her side to the wood of the door.
Finally, it completed the trip, and she rapped on the door three times. No response.

She sighed and was just about to turn away when a voice rang out: “Hi! Professor Ursula here. This is a sort of answering machine message, except for doors. You caught me when I’m out of the office for a bit. Just come in and make yourself comfortable, I’ll be back in a second.”

_Professor Ursula?_ Char frowned, but then the door creaked itself open, revealing a cozy-looking study. And she could hardly say no to chairs like those.

Not bothering to suppress a yawn, Char ambled forward into the room. It looked very comfortable and lived in, and there was even a pet bird—who looked like he’d seen better days. This had to be the famous Alcor, right? But the yellow crest on his front had faded, his feathers were scraggly, and even his eyes looked exhausted. This was a bird who’d seen too much life.

“Mood,” Char said, as she homed in on the room’s comfiest looking chair. She sat down, closed her eyes, let her head tilt back, and probably would have been snoring in about a minute.

Except that something kept exploding outside, and someone kept screaming. And the explosions and screams didn’t sound like Mani, either.

After the third scream, Char groaned, shoved herself up, and dragged herself to the open window. Mostly to close it. The plan kind of petered out once she reached the window, and got a peek at what was making all the noise.

It kind of looked like Professor Chariot was kicking the shit out of another student.

Char squinted, and tried to figure out what else might be happening, because Professor Chariot didn’t seem like the kind of person who would kick the shit out of a student, but… call a spade a spade, right? Chariot was in a skintight suit, and her feet were glowing with magical power, and she was using them to deliver powerful kicks toward some student who was raising a shield with her wand, trying desperately to block them. As Char watched, kick after kick was deflected, and Chariot seemed to be grinning.

Then she pointed her wand at the ground, and yelled something, and a huge plume of smoke erupted. Char leaned forward out the window, but she couldn’t get a better view—not until a few seconds later, when the student sailed out of the cloud like a cannonball, landing hard on her back. Her wand flew out of her hand, and after a few seconds of coughing she tried to reach for it, but Chariot leaped out of the smoke cloud, and landed with one foot on the ground and the other square on the student’s chest. Her wand pointed down at the student’s face.

Well, watching her mild-mannered magical astronomy teacher freaking murder someone wasn’t what she’d been expecting to do when she knocked. Her eyes wide, Char tapped her ear and muttered, “Amplificare.”

Just in time to hear Professor Chariot laugh as she holstered her wand. “Good job there! You held out longer than last time, Amanda.” And then she stepped off Amanda’s chest and stuck out a hand.

Amanda panted as she accepted it, pulling herself up. “Doesn’t feel like I’m getting better.”

“It takes time. Now do you know what you did wrong?”

“I guess? I dunno!” Amanda groaned, hands on her knees as she tried to make up for lost breath. “I kinda felt like I was just letting you wail on me at the end there, right? And when you used that smoke bomb spell, I panicked—I let you get behind me.”
“That’s basically what I was going to say, yes. Do you want to try again?”

Amanda heaved a few more seconds of breaths, then straightened up. “Ugh, I’ve got one more in me. Let’s do this.”

Chariot nodded. Then the two of them turned away from each other, walked ten paces, and stopped. “Start whenever you’re ready,” Chariot said, looking over her shoulder with a smile.

Amanda stared at her with steely eyes. Then, before Char could blink, she moved—sweeping her wand close to the ground and shouting, “Fos spathi!” A sword of glowing energy erupted from the tip of the wand just in time to cut off a thousand blades of grass. Before they could fall to the ground, she shouted again, and the grass floated in front of her and… turned into swords?

The swords launched themselves across the pitch at Chariot in one great long cloud, like a swarm of locusts in a cartoon. “Inventive!” Chariot called out, but she bent her knees and leaped over the swords as they reached her, then—Char blinked a few times to make sure she was seeing this right —starting running across the top of the stream. “But sending all your little attacks all at once makes them as easy to dodge as one attack! Try to space it out, to keep things….”

She reached the end of the stream, where Amanda had been—only Amanda wasn’t there. “Unpredictable,” Chariot said, jumping off the last sword.

“HAH!”

Amanda leaped at her from the side, while Chariot was still in mid-air, and swiped at her with the lightsaber. “Aegis!” Chariot yelled, and a forcefield deflected the attack just in time.

“Now who’s getting wailed on!” Amanda yelled. She plunged her wand down into the ground, shouting yet another spell, and pulled it out with an earthen sword at the end—which she tossed up into the air before resuming her attacks. Chariot blocked each one with yet another shield spell, but then Amanda’s second sword came down. She caught it and slashed at Chariot.

Chariot ducked like a Matrix character, sending Amanda off balance. Chariot planted her hands on the ground, sprung up into the air, and shouted, “Vega varulus!”

She hit the ground heel-first, and the impact created a shockwave, sending earth rolling outward for meters. Amanda cursed, slashed both swords against the ground in a V shape, and called out, “Katedafisi!” A spark appeared at the point where her two swords touched. She smirked and drove both into the ground, just as the shockwave reached her—

The explosion was so loud that it shorted out Char’s enhanced hearing. She stumbled back, eyes clenched shut and hands clamped over her ears in pain, spewing curses that she herself couldn’t hear. When the ringing and the pain stopped, she ran back to the window, leaning out as far forward as she could just to watch—

The grounds looked like a goddamn asteroid field, with chunks of earth floating in midair, and Chariot was jumping from one to another as if gravity were merely a suggestion. Amanda had her sword and wand held in both hands, and was firing huge blasts of energy at her, but Chariot dodged them without apparent effort. Amanda couldn’t seem to lead her correctly, no matter how she tried.

Amanda snarled and started pointing at the floating earth instead. “Belga veeda! Belga veeda!” With each explosion spell she shot off, another piece of debris vaporized into a shower of dirt. Chariot jumped toward another foothold, approaching Amanda, but her intended landing place was destroyed just before she got there: her eyes shut and she crossed her arms as she dove through the
wreckage, then smacked right into the ground. Even with how she rolled to soften the blow, she looked hurt.

Amanda grinned, and ran toward her, but Chariot pushed herself to her feet and said something under her breath, and—a plume of smoke covered her location. Before it disappeared, three Chariots ran toward Amanda, each one starting from where the original Chariot had been. Amanda skidded to a halt, her confidence evaporating in an instant, and started shooting at the clones: “Murowa!”

Which one was the real Chariot? One was coming straight at Amanda, dodging her fire, but the other two were flanking from the sides. Amanda was backing up quickly, casting Murowa as fast as she could, and finally she started making contact: the Chariot to her right was struck and dissolved into smoke, and then the Chariot in front of her. Char smiled: so that meant the one on her left had been real the whole—

“Murowa!” And in a final burst of smoke, that Chariot was destroyed as well.

Amanda looked around in panic, because the smoke was all over the battlefield now, but she didn’t look around fast enough to see the silhouette in her peripheral vision. The real Chariot emerged from the fog, grabbed Amanda as she lashed out with her wand, and did some kind of crazy judo throw. Faster than Char could process, Amanda was flat on her back yet again, her arm twisted painfully, and Chariot stood over her. Amanda’s wand fell on the ground beside her. The fight was over.

Char saw they were talking again, and hurriedly cast another Sense Amplification spell on her ear, just in time to hear Chariot’s advice: “… shouldn’t have assumed that any of the clones were me. If your opponent gives you a set of options to choose from—”

“They’re probably all bad choices,” Amanda grumbled. “I know, you’ve said.”

“Knowing isn’t the same as being able to put it into action, is it?” Chariot untwisted Amanda’s arm, then pulled her up. “But you held out for a lot longer that time. Good job changing tactics on the fly. You’ll be able to keep making those good tactical decisions as long as you—”

“Keep my head, yeah.” Amanda swept her hand up through her hair, getting it back into some kind of shape. “I just… I dunno, I hate it when you trick me with those smoke clouds and illusion magic and stuff. Doesn’t feel like a fair fight, y’know?”

“Fights aren’t fair. Life isn’t either.” Chariot smirked. “But if you can learn to overcome it in a safe environment, then I know you’ll be able to do it in the real world too. With any kind of trick.”

Amanda didn’t respond, but she did look away, which probably counted as some sort of response anyway.

“Amanda.” Chariot walked up to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “If you want to keep doing this to blow off steam, then that’s perfectly fine, and I’m happy to help. But if you really want to start improving, I could teach you the same kinds of exercises I do. Not just spellcasting, but basic hand to hand combat. What do you think?”

Amanda didn’t move for a few seconds, but eventually turned back to face Chariot with a little nod. “I’d like that, yeah.”

Chariot smiled in return, and clapped Amanda on the back. “Trust me, you’re gonna be great. You’ve already got a natural talent, and with a little help…..”
She trailed off, and then looked up. Up and at Char, leaning out the window. And then Chariot blanched. “Oh my gosh. Amanda, I’m so sorry,” she stammered, backing away from her student, “it looks like someone else needs my help right now. Could you do the cleanup work yourself this time?”

And there was quite a bit of cleanup: the ground was so comprehensively torn up that it looked ready for planting, and pieces of magical weaponry littered the area, some of which had halfway transformed back into blades of grass. Amanda groaned and leaned down for her wand. “Oh, fine.”

“Great! Thanks! I’ll—I’ll slide the exercises under your door later tonight. Sorry again! See you next week!” Once she’d finished talking, Chariot stopped backing away, but only so she could fully turn around and start running away. “Vega varulus! Clear the window!”

Char wondered what that meant for all of two seconds. Then Chariot, mid-sprint, bent her knees and took a running jump—directly at Char’s face. Char yanked herself back indoors and stepped to the side, just as a red blur flew through it, skidding to a halt and leaving furrows in the carpet.

“That was like five stories,” Char muttered to herself.

“Whoof! That was a workout.” Professor Chariot bounced on the balls of her feet, as if spending five solid minutes fighting to the death hadn’t burned out all of the energy in her. To a girl as athletically indisposed as Char, it was like watching someone do a song and dance number after running a marathon. “Sorry, by the way,” Chariot said, grinning as she bounced. “The sessions Amanda and I have been doing have been kind of intense, but that one was a lot even by our standards.”

“A lot? That was nuts.”

Chariot laughed, looking weirdly sheepish. “Well, you have to reach every student differently. I hope you weren’t waiting too long.”

“It’s fine. Professor Ursula’s message said you were out.”

“Professor Ursula’s—” Chariot clapped her forehead. “Oh my gosh, has it really been so long since I changed the message? Wow, I let that get away from me.”

Char snickered, trudging to the comfy chair and collapsing into it. “Can relate.”

“Well, something to add to today’s schedule.” After taking a moment to scratch her bird on the head, Chariot crossed to the other chair with none of Char’s lethargy, and sat down with her legs crossed. It was a good pose for her, showing off all her leg muscles under the… well, Char couldn’t call it anything other than a catsuit. A thin-as-paint catsuit with a little cutout on the chest, perfectly placed to show just a hint of cleavage. Add to that the brilliant red hair cascading around her shoulders, and Char figured that Professor Chariot was probably gonna be responsible for a bunch of lesbian awakenings at this school.

Then Char thought about that thought more carefully, decided she didn’t want to deal with it right now, and filed it away for later. When she came back to the present, Chariot was looking at her, and she got the sense that the teacher had asked her a question. “Sorry,” Char said with a little frown, “zoned out.”

“I just asked, what do you want to talk about, Char?” The look on her face was nothing but attentive, as if Char hadn’t just ignored her.

Char looked away. “I dunno. Akko says I should talk to you about my grades or whatever, but I
“Your grades. Yes.” Professor Chariot nodded. “And why don’t you see the point?”

“Well, it’s a bit late now, right?” Char snorted. “What’s done is done.”

“All right.”

A pause. Char leaned forward. “All right?”

“If I try to push you to talk about it before you’re ready, you won’t talk about it.” Chariot leaned forward too. “But I do get the feeling you want to talk anyway. Something on your mind?”

Well…. “Professor Ursula?” Char crossed her arms. “Is Ursula, like, your uncool real name, and Chariot is your stage name, or—”

“Chariot du Nord is my real name.” Lines seemed to appear on the professor’s face as she spoke. “Ursula Callistis was just… a place to hide. A pseudonym I used for about ten years after I couldn’t bring myself to be Chariot anymore.”

“Right, right.” That did pique some vague recollection in Char’s head. There had been a minor news item in the days after Starfall, something about how the world famous performer had been teaching in secret at Luna Nova for about a decade, and had just turned up. Any other day, it probably would have been front page news.

Char let the silence hang for a few seconds. “I, um… what do you mean, couldn’t bring yourself? How does that even work?”

“Well, I had a pretty great heyday. I was riding high for so long, I seemed to be on top of the world…. ” Chariot raised a hand, palm flat, letting it soar like a gliding bird—then she sent it plunging down as she continued, “And then things started falling apart. Like, I was still doing the same things, still performing the same routine, only all of a sudden it wasn’t good enough. I wasn’t good enough, as Chariot. Do you have any idea what that’s like?”

Yes. Yes she did. “Nah,” Char said, as a coldness pooled in the pit of her stomach.

“Well, I didn’t know how to cope. It was paralyzing.” Chariot sighed, looking at her gravely. “I tried to keep putting a brave face on it, hoping it would all work out like it always did, but it didn’t—and one day everything just… snapped. And I had to run away.”

“Wow.” Char took deep breaths, and tried to ignore the look Chariot was giving. It didn’t mean anything, that Chariot was saying this stuff, did it? It certainly didn’t mean—

“Char, being a teacher means I can look at your transcripts.” Chariot leaned forward. “I mean, the ones from before you came here to Luna Nova.”

“Oh.”

Silence. Char tried to shove herself into the crack of the chair and out of sight, as casually as possible.

“Like I said,” Chariot continued, pulling her chair a little closer to Char’s, “I won’t force you to talk about it—”

“Kinda feels like you are, right now.”
“—but I’m concerned about your grades too, at least as much as Akko is.” Chariot rolled her eyes. “I mean, really, I should be more concerned than she is, since it’s my literal job. Trust me when I say, there is a way for you to succeed at Luna Nova.”

Char looked away. It would be really, really nice to tune this out and go to sleep, but Professor Chariot’s persistent words felt like a corkscrew burrowing into her chest. Like one of those bamboo torture setups she’d heard about on that TV show, where the plant kept growing, slowly but surely, until it pierced your heart—

“Just say the word, Char—just tell me that you’re willing to really give this a chance—and I’ll do whatever I can to help you. I can do study sessions with you, I can help you set schedules, I can get some of your homework deadlines pushed back—”

“What about for classes you don’t teach?” The anger in Char’s voice surprised herself: she flinched back.

Professor Chariot smiled. “The other teachers have learned to listen to me when I say a less-than-perfect student deserves a second chance. But I can’t do this for you, Charlotte. You need to be the one to make the choice, that you want to—”

Char stood up so fast that the seat toppled over.

She sucked in a breath. Let it out. “Thanks for the talk,” she said, not looking at her teacher. She hurried through the door and slammed it shut behind her.

The weekend came. It was hardly the respite from schoolwork that most weekends were.

Tiffany, Char, and Mani spent most of it cooped up in the library, combining spells one by one, trying to see what would happen. Trying to come up with something good. But they were all distracted, and Tiffany could feel it: Mani kept tapping her wand against her nullitite stone, and Char was even more reserved than usual (where had Akko taken her? Char wouldn’t say). As for Tiffany, her mind kept wandering, wondering where exactly Scarlette had gone, and if she would show up again.

Not wondering for long each time, it had to be said. Where else was that stupid child going to find someone who was willing to help her—or able to hear her? Yet the worry persisted.

So, as night fell on Sunday, she was gazing at the window in thought. “Any sign of her?” Char said.

“None.” Tiffany sighed, and was about to turn away when she saw three specks moving above the Forest of Arcturus. Obviously, unless Scarlette had figured out how to clone the Shooting Star, it wasn’t her… but who would be stupid enough to be in the forest, this close to nightfall?

“Amplificare,” Tiffany muttered, tapping her wand close to her eye, and her vision zoomed in. Then she sighed. “Of course.”

“What?” Mani said.

“Don’t worry about it.” Tiff turned away and pulled the curtains shut, then climbed up to her top
bunk. “I think we’ve finally got something we can work with,” she said to the room at large. “The combination of the thunderbolt spell with revitalization magic should produce a magic defibrillator.”

“Gonna be a pain to show it off.” Char stretched out on the bunk below, groaning the whole time. “Someone wanna have a heart attack so we can demonstrate it?”

“Har har. I bought a defibrillation dummy that they use for CPR testing. It should show up by tomorrow morning.”

“And you’ll be able to pick it up on time without your special broom?”

“Well, I can at least try, can’t I?” Tiff took deep breaths, lest she become the dummy in need of defibrillation. “It should be fine, all right? And we’re all going to get really good grades on this project, and we’ll have made some cool magic that can help people.”

The last words were directed down at Mani, but no response came. “Mani?” Tiff said, leaning over her bed’s railing, because Mani was staring at the bullseye on the opposite wall.

Mani started. “Oh! Yes, that all sounds fine. I was just… thinking.”

Tiff nodded. It wasn’t something she wanted to think about, but Mani’s self-imposed deadline for deciding to drop out was tomorrow. If that was the choice she ended up making.…

“I just want to say,” Mani said, her voice quiet, “that… you two are the best part of Luna Nova. And whatever I decide tomorrow, I want you to know that.” She turned around and forced a weak smile. “Thanks.”

Char raised a thumbs-up. “Any time.”

“But couldn’t you just use a real defibrillator instead of this?”

Tiff’s eyes narrowed, and she leaned so far out over the railing that she was balancing on her stomach. “Okay, first of all—”

At long last, it was the big day. Presentation day. The day when Tiffany and all of her classmates would show what they’d come up with, and give everyone else a chance to learn new spells.

Indeed, Tiffany was learning new things as she watched the other students grade. Firstly, that Professor Badcock had no interest in keeping people’s grades remotely private; secondly, that she had no interest in grading on any sort of curve; and thirdly, that… maybe Tiffany hadn’t exactly been the only one who found creating new magic difficult.

Just maybe.

As the current presentation wound to a halt, Professor Badcock peeked out from under a desk that had served as a makeshift bunker more than once. Right now, about half of said desk was made of jello. “Well,” Badcock announced, trying to steady herself on the half of the desk that was actually steady. “I appreciate your creativity in trying to create an X-ray vision spell, but it would appear that in trying to make the objects in question see-through, you introduced some other… unpleasant
side effects.”

She looked down her nose at the students who had presented. They were also jello. Tiffany wasn’t really sure how they were alive, but the notes she was taking were filled with extensive speculation. She’d already filled several pages with her notes on previous presentations, all their failures, and their grades.

“Decent idea, but refinement is necessary! C plus! And get yourselves to the hospital wing!” Professor Badcock waved them off. “You’re too painful to look at.”

The three of them didn’t say anything, possibly because their vocal chords weren’t working very well under the current conditions. They turned around and wobbled their way out the classroom door. Badcock muttered something under her breath, and the circle of furniture and floor that had been jello-fied—including part of her desk, a large section of floor, and a large box that had been used for the demonstration—returned themselves to their original forms. “Up next,” she said, picking up a restored piece of paper and adjusting her glasses, “G… for Gainesbury. Alice Gainesbury, would your group care to come down?”

That was another thing Tiffany had learned: the group projects were presented alphabetically by last name of the group’s leader. She wasn’t at all clear what it meant to be a group leader, besides having a tick next to your name on some sheet of paper in a filing cabinet, but she was nominally Black Team’s leader—and V for Vandergard was pretty near the end of the alphabet. Alice, with her much more alphabetically advantageous last name, was ensuring White Team got to present first.

Which meant Tiffany got to watch whatever crazy idea Alice had come up with, and then spend most of the rest of class agonizing over not being able to match it. Yaaaaaaayyyyyyy.

Alice walked down the steps of the lecture hall, holding a sheaf of papers to her chest. The groups before her had brought all sorts of things for their demonstrations, from live animals to priceless gems (well, hopefully the gem hadn’t actually been priceless, because that group had screwed up their demonstration, and the gem was currently in smithereens inside the trash can). Tiffany, for her part, had her team’s defibrillation dummy under the desk in front of her, having just picked it up that morning—and earning a tardy note on the class after she’d gotten it, but what could you do?

But all Alice had was a sheaf of papers.

Alice’s roommates Ximena and Rain walked behind her, and although their pace was slow to match hers, all three of them showed clear signs of excitement.

When Alice reached the front of the room, she cleared her throat, then took out her wand and traced out a large rectangle in front of herself. The lines of ink in the air turned into the solid lines of a desk that grew from nothingness, extending—no, dripping—to define the shape of four black-stained legs, which reached the ground in seconds. A chair was created in similar fashion under her, and she sat down, tapping her papers on the desk to straighten them out.

Badcock raised an eyebrow. “Quite impressive, Miss Gainesbury. But please tell me before you start the presentation.” She glanced back toward her protective desk.

“What?” Alice stared at her like she was crazy. Her two teammates, on the other hand, stared at Alice like the three of them were all in on a joke. “No, that wasn’t—I just needed somewhere to sit. The presentation starts now. Rain, Ximmie?”
Her friends nodded, and got to work with their own wands: light shone from them, and formed into a rectangle which hovered above Alice like a Powerpoint slide. Alice smiled at them. “Thanks, girls.” And then she turned her attention to the assembled students, and her expression turned grave. “For our project, we decided to do something a little more ambitious than merely mashing two or three spells together to create a new one. That sort of innovation is valuable but… safe. Which seems to typify the whole art of witchcraft for the last thousand years, doesn’t it?”

She clasped her hands together, elbows on the table. “The Nine Olde Witches are responsible for creating upwards of fifty percent of all known spells. Which is great for them, but....” She grimaced. "Kind of depressing for the rest of us, wouldn't you say? And since the passing of the Nine Olde Witches, which was a millennium and a half ago, no one has made serious steps to innovate magic. No one has ever tried to create anything as fundamental, as powerful, as the World Altering Magic of the Grand Triskelion.” Relevant images appeared on the slide above her: the sigil of the Grand Triskelion, and a picture of the world on Starfall, when the World Altering Magic in question was let loose.

Tiffany was so engrossed by the slides, she almost forgot to take notes. Mentally slapping herself, she took her pencil and got scribbling.

“Even the greatest and the most innovative witches of the following years, from the great Jennifer to the voodooist Marie Laveau, never built on established traditions except slowly, safely. And never did anyone dare to reach the same heights as the Nine Olde Witches.” Alice leaned forward. “And to that I ask: why? The Nine Olde Witches were people—exceptionally talented people—but they weren't some... pantheon of demigods! If they could create incredible, world altering magic, then surely now of all times—now, at the dawn of the greatest age of magic the world has ever seen—we can become their equals, if not their superiors. We can match the feats of magic they achieved.”

She smirked. “So that is our project.” And as the slide changed, she swept her arms wide. “To create a new Grand Triskelion.”

In the stillness that followed, Tiffany could have heard a pin drop. She did hear a wand drop, because Professor Badcock had had her wand out, and had apparently lost her grip on it. It wasn’t hard to imagine why.

Tiffany read, and reread, the slide above Alice’s head. Just in case, for instance, her ears had randomly decided to replace what Alice had actually said with random noises that sounded like “create a new Grand Triskelion”. But no. The slide proudly displayed, “Neo Grand Triskelion Project” for the world to see, or at least that part of the world occupied by this classroom. Create a new Grand Triskelion? It was a bit like announcing your intention to develop a four-sided triangle, or perfect the perpetual motion machine. It wasn’t a thing.

Alice looked around the room, and her gaze lingered on Tiffany for a few moments longer than necessary. Go on, her eyes seemed to be saying, try to top this. To the class she announced, no less smugly, “Well, don’t all start asking questions at once—give me a chance to finish the presentation first!” She snorted. “I’m sure you all think this is impossible. You wouldn’t be the first, but my intention is to make you the last. For you see, as our teacher so wisely pointed out....”

She glanced at Professor Badcock, whose expression of shock was being colored by something else, something Tiffany couldn’t quite identify.

“The Grand Triskelion is what it is not because of some transcendental, ineffable property.” The sarcasm dripped off Alice’s words so heavily that Tiffany was surprised not to see little splotches on the desk. “It is the way it is because nine incredibly talented witches used magic upon it. Nine
witches who shared a special, but observable and even replicable, bond. In point of fact, for reasons I will detail more thoroughly in the rest of my presentation, I believe that it may not have been created on purpose at first.”

Tiffany squinted, and Scarlette’s words came back to her: *We sort of made the Grand Triskelion by accident. Just magic fallout, coming from the magic we were testing out ourselves.* But Alice hadn’t been talking to Scarlette, because no one else could besides Tiffany. How had she found all this out in a week?

“And what this means, specifically, is that the Grand Triskelion is *not special.*” The last two words were accentuated not only by Alice’s fist on her desk, but by flashing letters on the slide, repeating the words in question. “Any location—or indeed, any object—which has magic from those Nine Olde Witches… or sufficient witches with a similar bond… will display similar World Altering properties. But to explain all of that, we’ll need to get a little more in depth.”

Alice smirked, and flipped the cover page of her sheaf off to the side. “Grab your notebooks, ladies,” she said. “This is going to take some explaining. Section One….”

And Tiffany grabbed her pencil and got to work.

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_Some explaining_ was just a teensy weensy bit of an ever-so-slight understatement. Alice’s presentation lasted until the end of class, and that was just how she liked it.

She didn’t stop talking. She didn’t cease her gesticulations, her explanations, even as she fought back the fatigue that tried to grab at her body, and even as Rain had to pause the presentation to pierce her back with an extra round of enervating needles. But this was her marathon, and she would run it. She owed it to herself, and to the friends who’d stuck with her. And she held their attention, too. The students who’d started off looking skeptical—or, rather, downright incredulous—were hanging on her every word by the end of it. Even during the finicky technical bits, all eyes were on her… minus two. Two eyes, under a bit of stupid white-blonde hair. Eyes which would look at the slide, and then slide smoothly down to her notebook, without ever once landing on Alice in the intervening distance.

But who cared what Tiffany thought?

“So, what’s the takeaway?” Alice finished, ignoring the bell as it rang. “The Grand Triskelion is no more than an unusual artifact, it can be _replicated_, and I have proof of how to do it. This concludes the presentation.” She snapped both her fingers, and Rain and Ximena released the spell that powered the slides. She gave each one an appreciative smile, then returned her gaze to the students and letting the smile turn cocky. “We’ll be taking questions at this time.”

There were no questions to take. Everyone kept staring at her, and a tiny insubordinate part of her wasn’t sure if it was a ‘hanging on every word’ kind of stare, or a ‘this is the craziest thing I have ever heard in my life’ kind of stare.

“No,” Professor Badcock said, “you most certainly will not be taking questions at this time.” Alice looked over to see her red in the face. She hadn’t paid the woman much attention during the presentation, only shushing her when she’d tried to tell White Team they were taking too long, but now she looked _furious_. “Class dismissed!” she barked to the room at large. “Those who missed
their chance to present due to this foolishness will present tomorrow. And as for you, White Team?” Her eyes narrowed. “F!”

Alice bolted upright like a pin had sprouted from the seat of her chair. “What?” In the stands, she thought she heard someone stumble. “F for foolishness!” Professor Badcock adjusted her glasses. “Firstly, because the entire purpose of this project was a practical demonstration, not a lecture about theory. Secondly, because you clearly do not have any sense of how to listen when a teacher tells you to finish up. And thirdly, and most importantly…” She glowered. “Because I have never heard such a load of tripe in my life. The idea that a girl such as you, who can’t even make it through a class without dozing off, would presume to call herself the equal of the Nine Olde Witches themselves? I don’t know which is further out of control: your imagination, or your sheer unfiltered arrogance!”

Badcock sniffed, and then turned away. “F indeed. It’s a pity: that spell with the desk seemed rather promising.”

Alice sliced her wand across the desk in question, as well as its chair: they fell apart into puddles of ink, and the ink slowly evaporated. These obstacles gone, she advanced upon Badcock. “My friends and I worked on this all week. We did the measurements. We proved our conclusions. Are you calling them liars?”

But Professor Badcock was as immovable as a stone wall. “F, Miss Gainesbury, and if you do not stop arguing about it, I will find a way to drop the grade lower!”

Alice felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked up to see Ximena shaking her head. “Good try,” she said, “but I think we need to let it rest now.” Rain, standing next to her, nodded in assent.

“No!” Alice grabbed the hand, not to shove it off, but to hold it. “You stuck with me on this,” she hissed, “you worked really hard, and I’m not going to let you get punished for it! Not when I can….”

Her eyes went wide. Then she took a deep breath, and calmly removed Ximena’s hand from her shoulder, and calmly walked in front of Professor Badcock’s desk. “Professor?” she said. “I’d just like to clarify something.”

“Yes?” Professor Badcock had some papers out already—apparently less to do work with them, and more to give the appearance of someone who shouldn’t be bothered.

“You said that our project had no practical component, and that we didn’t stick to a timeframe, right?” Alice smiled and leaned forward. “Can I make an offer?”

Badcock glanced up at her. “What sort of offer is this?”

Alice looked around, and saw that everyone else was out of the room. Good. “Keep the grade at an F for now,” she said, her voice sibilant. “But I’m going to do it. Me and my friends are going to do the practical component. And we’re going to do it by the end of the school year. And then, I think it would be fair if you changed our grades to a hundred for this assignment. Is that all right?”

“Hah!” The laugh was nothing but performative, but at least Badcock was looking at her now. “You should have told me to change your grade when pigs fly instead. That can be accomplished with nothing but low-level metamorphic magic. I’ll accept your offer, Miss Gainesbury, with extra credit thrown in—but in the meantime I suggest you focus on your actual classwork. You don’t want to let this grade sink your average.”
“Don’t worry,” she said brightly, “it won’t.”

The bright smile left her face as soon as she turned away. “Veni via semita,” she muttered, sending a spell at her scooter that waited in the wings. It shuddered, then backed itself out, turned toward the stairs, and bounced down them on its way to her. “So,” she said, looking at Rain and Ximena. Her scooter met her as she walked out of the room, and she deftly transitioned her knee onto it.

Ximena was sucking in a deep, deep breath. “I can’t believe you just did that,” she said.

“I can,” Rain said.

“I mean, yes, I can. I heard it. It’s an expression.”

“I know, but, like, I disagree with the expression too, my dudette? This is exactly on brand for her.”

“A new Grand Triskelion,” Ximena said.

The words seemed to echo in the hallway. Ximena and Rain stopped in front of Alice, looking at her. “You just made our grades depend on recreating the most arcane, most incredible piece of magic known to witchkind.” Ximena planted her hands on her hips. “¿En serio?”

“You know I’m not kidding,” Alice said quietly.

“Ugh, I do know.” Ximena pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Look. If you don’t want to do this…. Alice stared at her and Rain for a few seconds, and then sighed. “You’ll still be my friends. But you will definitely be my friends with a lower GPA than you would otherwise. And, like, seriously—when are any of us ever going to get another chance to do something like this?”

She stuck out her fist. “I know you think it’s a cool idea. And we know it can be done. All three of us. So, right now, are you with me?”

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A new Grand Triskelion.

Tiffany lay in her bunk, staring up at the ceiling. Those words were all she could think of, as if they’d been scrawled repeatedly on the ceiling by a crazy person, next to something about the effects of all work and no play.

If anyone else had been the one to propose that, she’d have laughed them out of the room. Anyone else in the world, from her teachers to the Nine Olde Witches themselves (particularly the one Olde Witch she’d had the most experience with). Well, maybe her mother could pull it off, because her mother could do anything, but just about anyone besides her, and besides Alice.

Alice could pull it off. Alice was smart enough and inventive enough and psychotically driven enough.

“I want to change up the project,” she announced to the ceiling.

For a few seconds, there was no response. Mani was praying, and Char was very busy doing nothing at all: the other noises in the room were coming in through the window, left open to let in
fresh air and bird calls. After about a minute, though, Mani finished her murmured prayers and straightened up. “What do you mean by that?” she said.

Tiff leaned over the railing. “I’ve been thinking about the project.” Technically true, since she wasn’t specifying which one. “Our idea is nice, but at the end of the day, aren’t we just… mashing two spells together?”

“‘At the end of the day’ is exactly right.” Mani stood from her bed and folded up the prayer mat. “It is the end of the day, and the project is due tomorrow.”

“Mani’s right,” Char said, with a voice that was more of a grunt. “Like… mate, do you have any idea what you want to change it to?”

“Nnn….” Tiff grimaced. “Not as such?”

“Caw!” yelled a bird.

“So you want us to, uh… abandon the idea we took a week to come up with. For an idea you’ve got a night to come up with. Just to make sure I’m grokking your jive.”

“I don’t know! Maybe?” Tiff pounded her bed with a fist. “It just feels like after what happened today, we can do better than this.” She paused. “Grokking my jive?”

“It’s a thing people say.”

“On which planet?”

“Mars, actually. I’ve got a book I could lend you.”

“Getting back on target,” Mani said, as she slid the prayer mat under her bed. She stood and looked at Tiff. “I think the project we have is… fine. You said you wanted something with magic that helped people, something that would get us a good grade, right? Doesn’t this project already do both those things?”

“Ye—but—” Tiff had both her palms out and upraised. “Professor Badcock was really harsh about projects, and—you’re the one who said we could just use a defibrillator! And when it comes down to it, it takes a while to arrange all the rocks in a circle! It’s not that useful during a heart attack! What if it’s a bad grade instead?”

“Caw!” yelled a bird again. Possibly the same bird.

“Tiff,” Char said, her voice a little more serious than usual. “Be honest with me. Is this because of the project that got an F?”

“Yes!”

“Cool.” Tiff heard the sound of Char turning over in bed. “Just so long as we know why the plan has to go up in smoke.”

“Well, I mean—yes, it got an F, but when you put it that way, it…” Tiff groaned and started clambering down the ladder. “It was absolutely the most impressive project in the whole class!”

“Mate, get over her.”

“That is not the issue!”
“Caw!”

Tiff groaned through gritted teeth. “Is everyone okay with me closing the window? That bird is really grating on me right now.” A noise of assent sounded from either side of her, so Tiff reached the foot of her ladder and reached out to shutter the window.

And right as it occurred to her that the caws she heard sounded less like an actual bird, and more like someone saying the onomatopoeia “Caw”, the bird(?) in question swooped down in front of her—and as she flinched, it was already flying away, past the window. It hadn’t actually flown in, so Tiff took some deep breaths.

However, something smaller had come in: a little scrap of paper, no larger than what you’d find inside a fortune cookie, that was drifting down to the windowsill. Tiff snatched it from the air before closing the window properly, and then turned it over to read it.

*Meet me on the top of New Moon Tower, by the Sorcerer’s Stone.*

- Your unofficial RA

Tiff reread the scrawl five times, as if it were some arcane written scientific paper and not a simple message. “Yo, what is that?” Char mumbled from her bed.

Tiff closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and sighed. Honestly, there were worse ways to spend an evening. “I’m gonna be out for a little while,” she said. Without pausing she grabbed her warm coat from a hook on the back of the door, pulled it on, and retrieved her wand. “Veni,” she said, and her broom—her normal, boring, albeit still top of the line broom—flew into her hand.

“What are you doing?” Mani asked.

“I have no idea.” And with a little groan of resignation, Tiffany yanked the window open again, muttered a “Tia freyre”, and was off.

The key, Chariot knew, would be phrasing it correctly. Helping these kids wouldn’t be the most difficult teaching job of her career—probably—but it was clear she wouldn’t be able to talk them into this drastic measure without being careful.

And it was a drastic measure. It was absolutely not something she’d consider for most students, but she couldn’t think of anything else that would work for them.

Besides, if the old woman wanted to keep calling herself a Professor, she really needed to teach more than once a decade. So, Professor Chariot put on a nervous smile, raised one fist, and knocked on the Black Team’s door. “Hello?” she said.

After a few seconds, it opened, and Mani al Kairouani was the one with her hand on the handle. “Professor Chariot?” she said.

“Hi!” She briefly raised a palm in greeting. “I was wondering if I could come in.”

Mani stepped aside. “Thanks,” Chariot said, and walked in. Mani returned to where she’d been sitting on her bed, and Char Jones was still lying flat on her back—good old unapproachable Char.
She would be the really difficult one. “Is Tiffany not here?” Chariot asked, noting the empty top bunk. “Where did she go?”

“Flying somewhere..” Char nodded toward the open window. “What, you wanted to talk to her?”

“No, just curious. I actually wanted to talk to Mani.” That was only half of the truth, which made it most of a lie, really—but Chariot was used to leaving the truth only half-said, and this one might actually work out well. She smiled and pulled up a chair. “Is this a good time?”

“I guess?” Mani was looking in her general direction, but not specifically at her. “You’re here about the, um…..”

“Your decision, yes.” Chariot let her smile take on a wan quality. “I’d ask if you’ve given it any thought since last week, but that kind of sounds patronizing when I think about it.”

“I’ve given it a lot of thought, yes.” All of Mani’s limbs conspired to make her look small, from her hands clasped in front of her torso, to her knees and ankles that were stuck together as if magnetized, to her bowed head. “A lot of thought.”

Behind herself, Chariot was pretty sure she heard the sound of Char sitting up in bed. Excellent. “You haven’t come to a decision, then?”

“I….” Mani sniffed. “I don’t want to go. And I don’t want to stay.” She unclasped her hands just long enough to wipe at an eye, then reclasped them once more. “I just… I can’t decide.”

Chariot stood up. “Mind if I sit next to you?” Mani didn’t make a sound, so Chariot proceeded as planned, maintaining enough personal space between them on the bed that it wouldn’t be weird. “I’m conscious of the fact that you and I see magic differently, so my advice might not feel the most… applicable. Which is why I didn’t come here to give you advice. Not exactly, anyway.”

Mani looked up at her. “Hm?”

“I was wondering, would you like to come with me on a walk?” Chariot smiled. “I want to show you something in the forest.”

“The… monster-filled forest?”

“Oh, please. I might not be at the top of my game, but I’ve still got a fair few tricks up my sleeves.” Chariot snorted. “As if there’s a monster in there that could take me.” Mani didn’t seem quite convinced, so Chariot rested a hand on her shoulder. “I promise, no harm will come to you while I’m there. That’s my word as a teacher.”

Technically true. Not really a nice thing to say, when it came down to it.

“Listen,” she continued, “at the very least, it’ll be a chance to clear your head instead of being all cooped up in here. It’s a pretty nice night out!” She glanced out the window, noted the solid cloud cover, and corrected herself: “I mean, at least it’s not raining. What do you say?”

Mani didn’t respond for a while, and Chariot could tell it was the kind of quiet that needed time and space, not the kind that needed an interjection to end it. She sat there, smiling comfortably, and waited until Mani said, “I think that’s fine.”

“Thank you! I think it’ll help. Just pull on your coat and we’ll leave whenever you’re ready.” Chariot stood, and walked to the door, and then hesitated and glanced down at Char. As if she’d only thought of it now. “Actually, Char, would you be willing to come too?”
Char looked up at her skeptically, so Chariot grinned. “I think Mani could use a little support from a friend right now.” And yes, Mani could definitely use that. It wasn’t the biggest reason, but it was the only one that Char was going to accept.

And true to form, Char shrugged. “Eh, fine. Can I bring my broomock?”

“I, um….” Chariot’s eyes widened, and she snapped her fingers. “Broom hammock! I get it! Well, I don’t see why not.”

“Sweet.” With that, Char began the apparently laborious task of sitting up and getting out of bed.

Chariot gave a little wave. “I’ll just, um, I’ll be waiting outside, okay?” And without waiting for a response, she opened the door again and let herself out. Then she sagged against the wall, and sighed.

It was a good idea. It was the only idea she had, and it would be perfectly safe, and if those two kids could make it through this then they could make it through anything.

Chariot just hoped she wouldn’t be too hard on them.
When Tiffany reached the top of the New Moon Tower, Akko was already sitting at the edge of the parapet.

Tiffany stared at her from atop her broom. Akko was facing up toward the clouded sky, away from the Sorcerer’s Stone, and the backlighting from the stone didn’t reveal much. Tiffany couldn’t tell whether she was waiting impatiently, or had just dozed off: her head was covered with a witch’s hat, which made sense considering how chilly it was. Surely she couldn’t have been waiting long, but Tiffany had always gotten the impression that Akko would get impatient about the Micro Express setting on a microwave.

She touched down and let out a little polite cough.

“Tiff!” And then, as if Tiffany had triggered a trip wire, Akko sprang to her feet, twirling around on the parapet to face her. “You made it!” Then she leaned forward and squinted. “Oh, hey, that’s not the Shooting Star. Weird.”

“Yeah….” Tiffany bent down to place her broom on the floor, gently. “It’s a long story.”

“Come on over.” Akko beckoned with a wave. “I thought you might wanna talk about stuff.”

“Stuff. What stuff? Stuff like how Scarlette flew away?” Tiff’s hands balled into fists, and she didn’t step forward. “Stuff like how Mani and Char are probably leaving school in a few days? Stuff like how I can’t come up with any new magic that’s good enough?” And that wasn’t even getting into how Alice was clearly outclassing her—

Akko shrugged. “Yeah, that all sounds like some stuff to talk about. Won’t you come over?” She tilted her head to the side. “I mean, if you’re afraid of heights or something, that’s fine, but it’s way nicer over here.”

Tiffany honestly couldn’t tell if Akko meant it as a jibe, or as actual consideration, but nevertheless she snorted. “Afraid of heights. What kind of witch….” Muttering to herself, she trudged on over to the parapet, swung her legs over the side, and sat down next to Akko… at an appreciable distance. “So,” she said, a little louder than she really wanted to. “I mean, if you’re afraid of heights or something, that’s fine, but it’s way nicer over here.”

But Akko held up a finger. “No, just… sit with me for a little bit.”

“But—but you just told me to talk with you—”

“After you sit with me!” Akko smiled. “After all, Mayenab Dysheebudo, right?”

“Maya… what?”

“It’s a Word.”

Tiff wasn’t sure how she heard the capital letter on ‘Word’, but she did—and somewhere down by Akko’s belt, she spied a glint of teal light. “In what language?”

“I dunno. But the Word basically means that patience is a virtue.”

Tiff frowned. “It’s clearly two words. I can tell by the way you said it—”
Oh, fine. If Akko the complete spaz could sit and look out at the sky with a smile on her face, Tiffany could do it too. She planted her palms on the cold stone, shivered a little, and settled in.

It was a pretty bad night for sightseeing, to be honest. Sure, Luna Nova was a breathtaking building, but these weather conditions weren’t showing it in its best light. For that matter, they were hardly showing it in any light: the clouds covered the moon and nearly every star, leaving the Sorcerer’s Stone itself to provide most of the illumination. If Tiff concentrated, she supposed she’d be able to see her and Akko’s shadows somewhere, looming large over the castle.

Not that she had anything against overcast skies—it was just that here, they weren’t very memorable. Back in New Amsterdam, she’d grown to love overcast nights in their strange way: the lights of the city would paint the clouds white and red, even purple if snow was on the ground. It was… she hadn’t ever really thought of the words to describe it before, but it felt like evidence of an ineffable connection between her and the world. There she was, with everyone else on this rock whirling through space, all proving their existence together as they cast out the darkness. It was proof she wasn’t alone.

Quiet humming filled the air. Tiffany, her reverie broken, glanced over at Akko to see her humming some tune which might have been atonal, or which might have had some melody Tiffany couldn’t pick up on before she elected to ignore it. There was also semi-regular percussion from Akko’s feet, idly kicking back and forth against the side of the tower. If Akko realized she was doing this, though, the smile on her face—a smile somewhere in the space between eager and serene—didn’t show any sign of it.

Tiffany would have found it annoying, but… no, it was just like city lights. Another sign of connection. She found herself smiling too, and let her heels percuss against the tower wall as she returned her gaze to the castle.

And just in time, as it turned out. An errant gust of wind blew through, jostling Akko’s hat (not enough to remove it). The wind also shifted the clouds, letting the moon peek through—and in one glorious instant, every tower top and colonnade was lit up.

Tiffany gasped at it, seeing her home away from home all illuminated like that. She could see her dorm room from here… no, that wasn’t quite right: she could see the wing containing her dorm, but the actual window for her room was on the wrong side. And she could see the tallest tower of Luna Nova, with its observatory balcony. Her mother had once told her, just as interesting trivia, that anyone who left Luna Nova had to take off from that balcony, vanishing as silently as possible —

Tiff blinked, and the instant was over. Clouds covered the moon over again, leaving Luna Nova in darkness.

Her breath hitched, and her legs stopped their kicking, and her fingers dug into the stone.

“There,” Akko whispered, and Tiff saw that she was pointing at something. “Can you see those ruins?”

The something she was pointing at was, regrettably, as shadowed as the rest of the landscape. That said, Tiffany was pretty sure she spied a small clearing in the forest, and a dilapidated old building in the middle of it.

“I once pulled a guy’s pants down in those ruins.”
The statement wasn’t just out of left field: it was more like it had crash-landed from a whole other ballpark. Tiffany couldn’t help but snort. “You what?”

“It was kind of an accident! The bear was chasing us.”

“What bear?”

“A bear named Arcas, and his face was as big as my whoooooole body!” Akko spread her arms wide, though apparently not wide enough if her story had any truth whatsoever. “And he was guarding those ruins and the secret fountain that lay within!”

Tiffany squinted at her. “And you were in the ruins, which were guarded by a giant bear, with some guy, because….”

“The answer to that involves me being really bad at metamorphic magic, a rich guy who I kind of made an ass out of,” Akko said, scratching her neck as she grinned, “and me thinking that the secret fountain could make me win at magic forever.”

“And… did it?”

“Nah. Turned out there was no secret ingredient, and I had to look inward to find my true strength, and hard work was the key, yadda yadda.” Akko paused for just long enough. “But to learn that I had to pull a guy’s pants down.”

Oh, goodness, Tiffany couldn’t hold it in any longer. She gigglesnorted into her hand. “You,” she choked out, “are terrible at telling stories!”

“Just the worst, yeah!” Akko beamed a smile onto her that was brighter than any searchlight. “I get everything backwards!”

Tiffany kept laughing for a few seconds more, before the fit eventually subsided. She took deep breaths, and stretched out her arms. By now, she’d been sitting on the stone for so long that it was almost warm.

“So,” Akko said, in a tone that was ever so slightly more solemn than before. “Feeling better?”

Tiff blinked. “I… am.” She turned to Akko. “Why’d you bring me here to talk? Like, here?”

“Hmmm… well, I was gonna talk to you down there.” Akko pointed down at the balcony off of Luna Nova’s tallest tower. “Because Chariot used to talk to me a bunch there. But then I thought, Chariot never talked to you there, so that would be kinda silly, right? And then I thought of this place, because I mean, whoo. What a view!”

Tiff nodded. What a view indeed.

“But I think maybe most of all…” Akko pursed her lips. “The Sorcerer’s Stone is right behind us. The Grand Triskelion is….” Her pointer finger vacillated through the air for a few seconds, before pointing down vaguely into the Forest of Arcturus. “Somewhere in that direction, I think. And the place where Yggdrasil was revived is somewhere up there—” she pointed up into the sky this time “—pretty close.”

Akko smiled. “I mean, Diana could probably tell you the exact spot if you asked her? But this has got to be pretty close to the most magical place on the planet. And I’m not sure exactly what’s been bothering you, but I know it’s something, and I know it has something to do with magic.”
“And what if it doesn’t?”

“Then we’ve still got a pretty great view.” Akko gave her a look. “But it is magic, right?”

Tiffany sighed. “I’m… I’m working on this project for Professor Badcock’s class, and for a while I couldn’t come up with any ideas. And then I could? And now I know the idea I came up with isn’t good enough.” Her shoulders slumped. “I just… I need to nail this project.”

“I’ve screwed up tons of projects.” Akko’s smile was probably meant to be reassuring, and to her credit, it got most of the way there. “Like, tons.”

“This isn’t just some project!” Tiffany pushed herself to her feet, staring down at Akko. “If I don’t get this project exactly right, if I don’t make the best new magic I can, then my friends are going to leave forever! Again!”

Akko squinted up at her. “What, so how do you do on this project determines what happens to them? I’m not sure that’s how it works….”

“It is! It is exactly how it works!” Tiffany turned around and started pacing on the parapet, to the nearest colonnade and back. Both hands were tangled in her hair. “And I know that I don’t have something good enough, something amazing enough, to keep them around! I know I’m going to fail them! I know I can’t come up with anything as incredible as….” As the Nine Olde Witches? As Scarlette? As Alice? “I know I’m not good enough,” she said at last, slumping against the pillar.

“Not good enough?” Akko smiled again, and stood up to lean against her own pillar. “Yeah, I know what that’s like.”

Tiff rolled her eyes. “That’s hard to believe.”

“Ask literally anyone who knows me.”

“I know you. And….” Tiff looked down and to the side. “And… I can’t measure up to you, either,” she mumbled.

For the first time that night, she heard a noise of confusion from Akko’s side. Tiff looked up to see her looking nonplussed, with half of her face in shadow and the other half lit bright green by the Sorcerer’s Stone. She looked… Tiffany didn’t have a word for it, but she had an image. The image of Akko leading her through a new leyline, all those months ago, as she stood upon the Shooting Star. The image that had been seared forever into her head.

“It’s just… you’re better than me, okay? You’re more inventive than I am, you’re… I would never have seen this coming, but I’m pretty sure you’re smarter than I am. You’re the one who changed magic forever, and you’re… you’re always trying to be there for everyone, so you’re even better at that than I am. And….” Tiffany had to look away, because the heat on her cheeks was too great. “I really look up to you. A lot.”

“Tiffany,” Akko said, her voice quavering, clearly touched. “That’s the nicest and most inaccurate thing anyone’s ever said about me.”

“I do, though! And that’s the crazy part!” Tiffany stared up at the ceiling and groaned, or perhaps more accurately she shouted. “Because half the time I can’t tell if you’re the smartest fool I’ve ever met or the wisest idiot! I can’t tell if you’ve got everything under control or if you’re just making it up as you go along! I don’t get you! And you’re the one who gets magic—in the most objective sense possible—so clearly I don’t get magic either!”
She shouted out another groan, and then slid down to a sitting position, her knees up by her face. “I just… why can’t I do this? If I’m so talented, why can’t I figure this out?” She sniffed and wiped her eyes. “What’s wrong with me?”

After a few seconds, Akko sidled up and sat down next to her again. It was closer than Tiff had sat previously, but she didn’t really care right now. When Tiff looked up from her knees, all she really cared about was that Akko was about to say something, but didn’t seem to know what it was. She kept opening her mouth, pausing, and then closing it again.

Finally, a little after Tiff had returned her gaze to her knees, Akko said, “What is magic to you?”

Tiff slid her feet forward, just enough to drop her knees and let her look at Akko without moving her head. “I’m sorry?”

“Like, in five words or less. No, you know what, let’s go with one word.” Akko leaned sideways toward her. “What is magic, to you?”

“I….” Tiff grimaced. “In one word? What, do you have an answer?”

“Joy.” Akko looked off into the distance, and her eyes seemed to shine, like a mirror in space reflecting an infinity of stars. “Magic is joy. The joy that everyone on Earth deserves a chance at. The kind that should be shared with everybody, no matter who they are. It’s… it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever known, and if I can make sure everyone else sees that too, then I’m happy.”

She smiled at the horizon for a few seconds more, before looking back at Tiff. “Okay, your turn now. To you, magic is…?”

The ‘is’ stretched out like a gas leak. Tiffany buried her face in her knees again, thinking. Magic, to her? Sure, a few things sprung to mind: her mother casting incredible magic without a second thought; Akko standing in the leyline; Alice, lying in bed until Tiffany could find the right spell; Mani blowing stuff up…. But how to condense that into a single word?

“Power.”

That was the word that left her lips after what felt like an infinity of contemplation. “Magic is the power to hurt or to help. It’s the power to win friends and influence people. It’s what you need to have as much of as possible, if you want to make any kind of positive difference in this stupid world—and once you have enough of it, you have an obligation to use it.” She sighed. “I just… want to help people. But if I don’t have the power to do that….”

“Power, huh?”

Tiff looked up to see Akko shrugging. “Not the answer I’d have gone with….” She paused, and clapped a hand against her face. “Well, duh. You know the answer I’d have gone with, because I went with it. Sure, though, let’s work with that. So how do you get more power?”

“Practice. Study. Reading about the spells, casting the spells, refining how you cast the spells. Discipline.”

“Cool! And how do you know if you have enough power?”

“What does that mean?”

“You know, enough power to help people, or to be obligated to help people, or whatever you said.”
Akko tilted her head. “How do you know when you have enough? Because you seem pretty sure that you don’t, right now.”

“I don’t know!” Tiff felt her fingers sort of clench up as she held her hands off to the sides. “I just know that right now, I don’t have the magic I need.”

“Huh.”

The silence stretched out.

“Can I tell you something?” Akko said.

Tiff let out a little “Mm-hm”.

“I never knew if I was good enough either.” Akko leaned in again. “I mean, I thought I was a lot—you should have seen how cocky I used to be, you woulda hated it—but when it really mattered, I never knew. I didn’t have the practice I needed or the study, and I sure as heck didn’t have the discipline. What I had was the goal, and I knew I had to do it... so I did. Even when ‘logically’ I knew I probably couldn’t.” Akko reached out and clasped one of Tiff’s hands with one of her own. “And then I looked back and it turned out that I could. I really could.”

Tiff looked up. “So... what does that mean for me?”

“I dunno. Maybe listen to your gut more and your head less?” Akko shrugged, even as she smiled. “I think mostly it means that when it comes right down to the wire, you might not know that you’re strong enough either. You might even know that you’re not!” Akko maneuvered her hand so that her and Tiff’s fingers were interlaced, and she gripped tightly. “But you’ll do what you have to do anyway, and if I know anything, it’s that you’ll look back and see that deep down, you were always enough.”

Tiff looked into her eyes, and saw the green light shining off them.

Before she could respond—before she could even figure out whether the words were reassuring or just bewildering—the clouds shifted with another gust of wind. Once more the moon shone down on Luna Nova.

This time, though, there was a difference. This time, out of the corner of her eye, Tiffany saw movement.

She frowned and peered down. Three figures were leaving Luna Nova out one of its many doors, and they were walking across the grounds. One was tall, presumably a teacher; one was shorter, the right height for a student; and one wasn’t really a recognizable shape for a human being. “Do you...” Tiff said, jabbing a thumb in their direction, “see that?”

“What?” Akko let go of her hand and leaned forward a bit, making ineffective binoculars with her hands. “Hang on, I think I—” And then the clouds covered the moon once more. “Nope,” Akko said, as darkness swallowed the figures, “just missed ‘em. Why’d you ask?”

Tiff squinted, then pulled her wand from its belt. “Amplificare,” she whispered, tapping by her eyes. She peered across the grounds, the spell granting her both a zoomed-in view and slight night vision. It was just barely enough to spy the three figures, and moreover, to determine who they were.

“Is that....” She squinted as hard as she could. “That’s Mani.”
“Oh?” Akko sounded interested.

“And behind her, that’s….” A flash of recognition told her that it was a recognizable shape for a human being, provided the human was supine and being carried in a flying hammock. “That must be Char,” she said. “And the teacher is… Professor Chariot?”

“Oh! I wonder where they’re going?”

“Me too….”

Tiffany kept her eyes peeled, still holding her wand at her temple to maintain the spell, for about a minute. It was enough time to watch the three figures cross the grounds and reach the boundary of —“The Forest of Arcturus?” she whispered.

“Oh! What?”

Chariot was lighting up her wand, enough to illuminate a short radius around her. It was enough to let Tiffany see Mani’s expression of fear. Then the three of them walked into the forest and disappeared from view.

Tiffany dropped her wand-hand to the stone. “They just walked into the Forest of Arcturus,” she said numbly. “They just… walked into the Forest of Arcturus. In the middle of the night.”

“Eh, it’s like nine o’clock at the latest.”

“What the—are you calm about this?” she blurted, standing up and glaring at Akko. “They just went into the most monstrous place in Britain! Why would they do that!?”

“They’re with Shiny Chariot,” Akko explained. “Don’t worry, they’ll be totally—”

Tiffany hopped off the parapet, back onto the central part of the tower, and ran to grab her broom. “I’m going after them,” she said, and u-turned to face toward where she’d last seen her friends. “Thanks for the pep talk. I think.”

“Tiff, it’s okay, you don’t need to—”

But Tiffany was already vaulting over the wall and into empty space. “Tia freyre!” she shouted, and her good old reliable broom took flight beneath her. Within a second she was leaving Akko and all of her beautiful nonsense behind, and diving toward the entrance to the woods. What were they doing in the Forest?

If someone had asked Mani several months ago what her ten least favorite places in the world were, she probably would have given them a funny look and told them that that was an odd list to have. Right now, on the other hand, she was pretty sure that she could fill a list of her hundred least favorite places in the world, and it wouldn’t be hard. All she’d have to do would be to choose one hundred random locations in the Forest of Arcturus.

“Why are we here?” she whimpered, shambling forward like a mummy with her hands outstretched. She kept stumbling over loose roots, since Chariot and Char were the only ones providing illumination spells: for obvious reasons she couldn’t trust herself to do it, unless she
wanted to start the world’s most embarrassing forest fire. So she kept her arms spread out for balance, and walked slowly, and tried to accept that she was still going to land flat on her face eventually.

“I dunno, it’s peaceful here.” Char hummed, floating serenely and supinely next to Mani. “Real quiet.”

Which, Mani was sure, just meant that she couldn’t hear the monsters stalking her from behind. She’d have preferred ominous rustling. “You said you wanted to show me something, Professor?” she whispered.

“Oh, yes!” Professor Chariot’s voice was incongruously chipper, though it was at least a little quiet. “The forest and grounds around Luna Nova are full of magical artifacts and locations, as I’m sure you know… you do know that, right? It should be in your history courses.” She slowed down a bit, letting Char take the lead, and walked beside Mani. “Well, I was doing some research the other day, and—careful—”

Mani’s foot hooked under a root, yelping as she pitched forward, and Chariot just barely grabbed her before she could faceplant. “Anyway,” Chariot said, returning Mani to a vertical position, “I found something special in one of my books. Something called the Defensive Amulet. The book didn’t have a lot of details, but based on what I read, there’s a good chance it might be able to help you control your magic.”

“Okay,” Mani whispered. She let Chariot keep a steadying hand on her, and kept walking forward.

After maybe ten minutes, she saw that the woods in front of her were thinning out: instead of a bleak dark void five meters away from her face, she could see bits of light. Before too much longer, the woods parted entirely, revealing a small clearing. “And here it is!” Chariot said, sounding relieved. “I was beginning to worry we’d gotten lost….”

Mani sighed in relief. Next to her, Char slid off her broomock and stood on her own two feet, albeit with one hand leaning against a nearby tree. “So,” Chariot said, pointing forward, “there it is! Go on, give it a try.”

In the center of the clearing, on a dais within a moonbeam, she could see a small necklace. Around it, for a dozen meters in every direction, she saw nothing but grass. Mani couldn’t see the Amulet very well from this distance, considering its size, so she hurried a few steps forward—and stopped.

Where was the moonbeam coming from? She looked up, and the sky was as overcast now as it had been when she’d entered the forest. Yet a moonbeam from nowhere was presenting the Amulet, like it was the prize piece in a jeweler’s collection. Inviting her to put it on. Whispering into her ear.

She took a step back. “Professor?” she whispered, because the more she stared, the more a creeping wrongness stole its way up her spine. The clearing was silent. Oppressively silent, like the silence of the vacuum of space: it was a silence that could devour words whole and leave her speechless. There should have been sounds from the forest. And, even on a night as dark as this, the shadows from the trees were subtly wrong, ever so slightly too deep….

Chariot’s stance tensed. Her knees bent, and her eyes narrowed, and she reached down to her belt to grab her wand. “Girls,” she said, looking from side to side as she backed up, “listen to me very carefully. Something else is here—”

Something gray and ragged flowed out of the forest, and wrapped itself around Chariot. Before she
could do more than shout, it yanked her into the woods and out of sight.

“Professor!” Mani shrieked. From the woods beyond came a scream.

She ran at the edge of the clearing, but had to skid to a halt: more ghostly fog burst up from the ground, and it swirled around the edge of the clearing, thick enough that Mani couldn’t see the woods beyond. She stuck out her wand, trying to push it into the fog, and it didn’t give way. They were trapped.

*I promise*, Chariot had said, *no harm will come to you while I’m there.* But Chariot wasn’t here. Mani backed away, pointing her wand at the fog bank, breathing too fast.

“Hey, chill.” A hand was on her shoulder, and she whipped around, wand at the ready—but it was just Char, and she was holding up her broomock. “Good thing I always have two of these, right? Just take one, and we can—”

There was a little tinkling noise of metal on metal. That was all the warning they got before Mani saw a flash of motion from the center of the clearing, and ducked—and the Defensive Amulet flew off its plinth, and went straight for Char.

There was a *click*, and when Mani looked up, the amulet had secured itself around Char’s neck. The moonbeam had followed too, making Char the brightest thing in the clearing. “What?” she said, looking down in confusion. She tugged at it a few times with her fingers, and reached around back to try to find the clasp, but nothing happened. “Whatever,” she said, shrugging and stepping forward, let’s just—hey!”

Because as she stepped forward, the amulet glowed, and a translucent gray cube was visible around Char. Her hand touched it as she tried to walk forward. “What is this?” she said, starting to sound as worried as Mani. Char planted both hands on it and shoved forward, as hard as she could, but she may as well have been trying to shove Luna Nova Castle itself. “What’s going on?”

Mani ran for the barrier and pushed as well, and she didn’t get any more of a result. “Okay,” she gasped, and sucked in three quick breaths in a row before raising her wand. “We know how to get rid of an unruly shield spell, right? *Fos machiari!*”

But it wasn’t a little dagger of light that shot out of Mani’s wand: it was an unbroken laser beam—and it went straight through the shield, out the other side, and into the fog beyond. For a moment, the fog seemed to be cut, but it quickly reformed. “Hey!” Char yelped, ducking—the spell had come close enough that pieces of her ginger hair were floating down.

“Sorry!” Mani halted the spell as quickly as she could.

“It’s like magic doesn’t even affect this stupid thing!” Char gave the barrier a kick, and the kick didn’t do anything either.

“Then what do we do?”

“No, not we .” Char stared her right in the face. “*You* need to get yourself out of here. I’ll figure something out, just—”

And the fog rolled in.

It formed a vortex around Char, and Mani yelped, backing away, *running away.* “Char!” she yelled. As the fog swirled, she saw faces in it—ghostly apparitions, crying out in torment, making her imagine a pain that lasted beyond death—and then the fog began to thicken, and become more
opaque. It kept swirling, but slower and slower, and before long it had the appearance not of fog, but of a tangle of roots. “Char!”

“Don’t worry about me!” By now, Mani couldn’t see Char’s knees past the fog. “Just go!”

“No! I won’t leave you!”

“You should listen to her, foolish girl.”

Mani whirled around, a scream dying on her lips. The fog was growing behind her too, but it wasn’t swirling in spirals: it was growing up and up like twisting, parasitic vines. They spun and they weaved through the air, and at the top, they formed a giant, gaping maw. And the darkness inside that maw was just indistinct enough that Mani’s brain started imagining things that could be hiding inside it. Her teeth clenched, her breath caught, she staggered back.

Without moving, the being spoke. “You should never have come here.” Its voice was layered, as if echoing in an invisible hall.

“So—” Mani gripped her wand tightly with both hands. “So let us leave, then! We’ll get out of your clearing, whoever you are, and we’re really sorry—”

A roar from the being cut her off. It wasn’t the roar of an animal: it was the roar of the wind in a gale, the kind that could tear up trees and blow down houses. “I am the Ghost of the Blue Moon, little girl,” the being said. With a horrible creak, its faceless face turned down to stare at her. “And you should neither have come to this clearing, nor this school.”

“I—” Mani took a step back. “I didn’t… I never wanted to.”

“I know you did not. For I am the one who knows the past, the present, and the future... and what I cannot answer, no one else can.” At the last word, another blast of fog came from the ghost, enshrouding the entire clearing in its gloom. Mani gasped and stepped back, but there was nowhere to step to—and this fog, it seemed, was content to remain gaseous and not become a barrier. “And I know, Imani bint Abdallah al Kairouani, precisely what you want.”

“Don’t listen to her!” Char yelled, and Mani whirled around to see that the swirling fog was up to her waist. She had her wand pointed at the amulet, and seemed to be blasting it with magic, and nothing was working. “Get out of here, Mani! You need to escape!”

“But escape, Imani, is exactly that which I am offering.”

The horrid maw shifted, and now there were eyes on that face, and they stared down cruelly at Mani. “Look forward, little girl,” she said in sibilant tones, and Mani stared into the base of the Ghost’s form. The fog-vines shifted and pulled away, forming a… a portal, a portal that blazed with the green-white light of a leyline. Mani’s breath caught, and she leaned toward the light, and at the end of the leyline there was something coming closer.

Home.

It was her family’s house. The light-tan walls to reflect the bright, burning sun; the high tower with the decorations built into the masonry; the wrought iron gate in the front that she’d learned to slip through undetected—she’d recognize it anywhere. She sucked in a breath and stepped forward.

“This is where you want to go, isn’t it, child? Where you’ve always wanted to go.” The portal spread a little wider, letting Mani see more of the blue sky. “Just go home, little girl, and never do more magic than necessary again, and everyone will be safe. Safe from you, and the curse you
“bear inside yourself.”

Mani was reaching out her hand, almost touching the portal, before she even knew what she was doing. She caught herself, stepped back, and looked up. “But—but my friend!”

“*You always knew you would have to leave your friend.*” The Ghost’s stare was almost comforting.

“Not like this! You’re hurting her!”

A low, quiet chuckle shook the clearing. “I am doing nothing to her, except what she has already done to herself. Look.”

Mani turned around. The fog had swirled its way up to surround Char’s chest, and whatever she’d been trying to do, she seemed to have run out of ideas. She was hunched over, heaving breaths. Forget about the swirling fog: she couldn’t even escape the amulet. “She won’t accept salvation from you, or anyone else,” the Ghost hissed. “Although we both know that there is nothing you could do to help. Your magic can only bring harm.”

“I…” Mani had no retort. Her wand-hand dangled limply by her side.

“*So come into the light, foolish girl.*” The voice, despite its cruelty, was strangely seductive. Mani found her eyes drawn to the leyline again, and her home looked close enough that she could ring the doorbell. “*Step through the door, and what you desire will come to be.*”

She reached out her hand—

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The swirling fog grew higher and higher, and Char felt like she was drowning.

She heaved breaths, pounding her fist against the Amulet’s barrier. “*Why?*” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “*Why won’t you let me go?*”

*Give up,* said the whispers from all around her. She saw faces in the fog, and it was impossible to tell if they were the ones speaking, or if it was the air itself, or if the voice came from her own head. *It’s what you do best, Charlotte. Give up, because this is too hard for you.*

“No,” she hissed, and held her wand in both hands. “*Fos machiari!*” she yelled, and the lightknife went through the barrier as if it were nothing—but her body still couldn’t leave.

She heaved breaths, eyes wide, as laughter surrounded her. “I can do this,” she panted. “I can do this. I know I can do this. I have to be able to do this.”

*Give up. You cannot be saved.*

With a yell, she kicked at the barrier, and all it did was hurt her foot. She leaned against the barrier, heaving great sobbing breaths. “I can do this,” she whispered. “I can do this....”

The fog swirled ever higher, up to her neck. It was closing in. Soon even the moonbeam would be covered over.

“No.”
Char squeezed her eyes shut, like she was trying to get the tears out. “No, I can’t.” She pounded the barrier again, and then stood up as tall as she could, on her tiptoes, and cupped her hands around her mouth. Mani had almost walked through that crazy ghost’s portal: it was now or never. “Mani!” she yelled as loud as she could, though her throat threatened to close up. “I need help!”

—and Mani’s hand froze.

“Char?” She turned her head around, and saw Char staring at her, shouting at her. Pleading with her. “Char!”

“Get me out of here!” she yelled. “Please! I can’t do this alone!”

“But—”

And for a moment, as Mani watched, the silvery-gray barrier around Char seemed to fade. But then the fog swirled higher, and she was completely surrounded. “CHAR!”

“Enough!” The Ghost’s voice sounded angry for the first time, and with the force of its words, more fog blew out to enshroud Char. “You know you cannot help her, you arrogant girl! Your magic is nothing but a curse!”

And Mani felt the fire of rage in her eyes. “No,” she said in a strangled voice, and raised her wand. “It’s not. Not if it can save my friend!” She raised it to point right at the Ghost’s lying face and shouted, louder than she ever had before, “PHARUS!”

And the Ghost reeled back as a blast of energy struck it and exploded, sending wisps of smoke scattering everywhere. The ghost staggered, the portal broke up, and home vanished—but Mani didn’t care. She was turning and running. “Char!” she yelled. “I’m coming!”

The fog was still swarming around her, forming a huge dome that was getting huger, and by now it was over the nearby treetops. She heard the howl of the wind, and the shrieking laughter of demons, and only very faintly did she hear Char, still crying for help. “I’m here!” Mani yelled, still crying for help. “I’m coming!”

Just needed to what? She knew her magic could cut this dome to smithereens—considering how large it was, her magic might be the only thing that could—but Char was in there somewhere, and Mani knew that the amulet’s barrier wouldn’t stop her magic from hitting her friend. What if she hurt Char? What if she cut her up instead of the fog?

What if the Ghost was right?

Her hand shook, so she grabbed the wand in both hands, breathing hard. “Fos,” she said, and heaved a few frantic breaths before trying again, “Fos—!”

Hey. Look at me.

She stopped. Chariot’s voice, from that lesson, was playing in her head. Deep breath..... She sucked in air, willing her heartbeat to calm. And out. You’re doing great. She exhaled. Her hands were steady. And if she just aimed a little bit to the right of the dome’s center....
That thing inside you isn’t stupid, and it’s not awful.

She raised her wand to the sky.

It’s just you.

“FOS MACHIARI!” she bellowed, and a gleaming ray of light sliced into the heavens, ready to put holes in the stars. With a scream of anger, she brought her arm down, slicing through the dome of ghostly fog as if it were nothing more than the world’s largest onion. The fog seemed to cry out in pain as her light burned through it, leaving a gash wide enough for a tree to fall through.

With both hands on her wand for guidance, she kept her wand moving, slicing at the fog over and over as it tried to reform, until the whole right side of the dome had been reduced to wisps. Then she released the spell and ran forward. “Char!” she yelled. “I’m here!”

Char was in the center, exposed like the pit of an apple, but the amulet’s barrier was still up. She stared at Mani with wide, terrified eyes. And every second that Mani wasn’t using her magic, the fog was coming back. “Please,” Mani whispered, and reached out her hand. “Let me help you.”

Char looked at her. Then, in one decisive movement, she reached back.

The amulet fell off her neck, unclasping itself right then and there, and the barrier vanished. Mani grabbed Char’s hand, pulled her into a run, and the two of them dove onto the grass as the fog tried to form around them. “Char,” Mani gasped, feeling the other girl’s hand squeeze hers tight. “It’s okay.”

Char lifted her head from the ground and looked back at her. “Th—” The word caught in her throat, and she spat out some dirt. “Th... thanks.”

“Any time,” Mani said, feeling a little choked up herself.

Then her eyes narrowed, and she shoved herself to her feet. The Ghost was still towering over them, struggling to reform, with only the suggestion of a face coming back together. “You,” Mani hissed. Her wand pointed forward. “How DARE YOU! FOS MACHIARI!”

The ray of light burst from her wand, striking right through the Ghost’s heart. “No!” it cried out, as Mani roared and ripped her wand to the side. “Stop!”

Mani didn’t care. She raised her wand, grabbed it in both hands, brought it down for what she hoped would be a decisive blow—

“Mani, stop!”

And then hands were grabbing her own, and her wand was being wrested away, and a warm body was pressing against her own. “It’s not what you think!” said the voice, a voice that Mani recognized. “You’re okay!”

She gaped. “Professor Chariot?” she managed, looking up into a frantic, bespectacled face.

“It’s okay!” Chariot repeated, holding her tight. After a few seconds, Mani realized it was a hug. This was nice, because she was able to hug back, but it didn’t make anything less confusing. “You did wonderfully. Just breathe. Deep breaths.”

“But....” Mani’s jaw kept working uselessly. She had a million questions, and she was trying to say them all at once, which meant saying precisely none at once. “You were—the fog—that ghost
“I think what she’s trying to say,” said the voice of Char, “is that we want to know what the hell just happened.” Mani looked up to see her approaching, and it wasn’t clear whether the shaking in her voice was fear or anger.

Chariot sighed, and as soon as Char was close enough, she reached out and pulled her into the hug too. “I’m sorry,” Chariot whispered. “Before I start explaining, I just want you to know that you were safe the whole time—and that I’m sorry, but I couldn’t think of any other way to help you two. And it worked. You passed with flying colors.”

“Passed?” Mani only barely managed to choke the word out.

Chariot released the two of them, smiling. “This was what I wanted to show you in the forest. It was a test for both of you. And you couldn’t have done better.”

There was a moment of silence, as the fog continued to dissipate around them. Then Char opened her mouth. “What the fuck, sheila?” Chariot winced, and started to open her mouth, but Char plowed ahead: “No, I’m pretty sure I get a freebie swear after that! You’re saying this was all fake?”

“That’s… not how I’d put it….” Chariot looked away, smiling nervously.

“So what was that—that amulet thing!? The Defensive Amulet?” Char pointed her wand at the discarded amulet, and yelled, “Veni!” It flew into her hand. But as it came over, Mani realized that it didn’t look the same anymore. Where silver and bronze had been entwined, now she only saw braided grass, and in place of the shield emblem at the front there was an acorn. “Oh, come on,” Char spat, throwing it to the ground. “That was fake too?”

“Well….”

“Then I guess the fog monster was just you with a smoke machine and a funny voice!”

“Ah.” Chariot clicked her tongue. “No, uh, she’s very real.”

Char and Mani looked at their teacher.

Then they looked at the fog monster. It—or, apparently, she?—was reforming again, and Mani reached for her wand only to remember that Chariot had taken it. However, as the Ghost formed, it was changing: its face appeared, and then softened. The ghostly tendrils that made up its body became less like fog and more like old wood, and then the wood seemed to regain its youth, and lose its lines. The netting of smoke became a magnificent cascade of green hair, blowing in an imaginary breeze.

When it was done, there was nothing monstrous about her anymore except her size: she towered five, maybe six meters above them. Her face was angelic, eyes closed beatifically, and under her hair she wore a diadem festooned with antlers. Her robe was green, and seemed to be made of living flora, with frills of grass at her neckline, waist, and skirting the dress’s very bottom. Mani felt herself relaxing, looking at what the monster had become, and she knew that Char was doing the same beside her. She could swear she’d seen this person before.

“Girls,” Chariot said, laughing as she stepped back, “I’d like to introduce you to someone very important to me. My colleague, my mentor, and someone with whom I’d trust my life… and I guess in a way, I already have.” She raised a hand, beckoning at the giant apparition. “But I think you’ve probably heard of her already. Say hello to Professor Woodward.”
The glowing figure inclined her head.

If Mani had still been holding her wand, she would have dropped it. “Professor Woodward? The *Olde Witch* Professor Woodward? But—” she glanced at Chariot, and then back at the woman “—but how is she here?”

“I never left.” Woodward opened her eyes, and they were as green as spring itself. “*Luna Nova is my home, and I have remained to do what I can do best: teach.*”

Chariot grinned. “She’s got a really good track record at guiding students who need… unconventional help. Students like myself, or….” She scratched her neck, her smile turning into a frown. “Actually, maybe I shouldn’t say….”

“You refer to Atsuko Kagari?”

Chariot winced.

“Whoa.” Char looked at Chariot. “Big sis Akko did this too?”

“Not this, specifically! Everyone gets a different trial. But, uh, basically yes.”

“Indeed.” Woodward glided closer, and Mani realized she didn’t seem to have feet to walk on. “For Chariot du Nord and Atsuko Kagari alike, this trial guided them on the path to unlocking the Words of Arcturus, and to magic’s very revival. However, you two have no Words to revive… and yet,” Woodward said, kneeling down so that she was only two meters taller than Mani, “you have nevertheless unlocked powers within yourselves that cannot be discounted.”

It didn’t feel like anything that counted. “So it was just a test?” Mani said, looking Woodward in the eye. “So none of it was real? So it didn’t matter?”

“It was all real.” Woodward reached her hands out, each as large as a girl’s torso, and touched Char and Mani on the shoulder. “The choices you made, the magic you used, and the lessons you learned. That is, if you understand what those lessons are.”

“I…” Mani closed her eyes for a second. She looked back at Chariot, who nodded encouragingly. “I guess I learned that… that I really can use my magic to help people. That I can control it—or maybe it’s not always about controlling it, but I don’t need to run away from it. It’s not just….” She sniffed, and smiled. “I’m not just wrong.”

Chariot nodded, and this time it was a decisive nod. Then she looked at Char, who was clearly trying not to look at her, or Mani, or Woodward. The ground, on the other hand, seemed to have her full attention. “Char?” Chariot said.

“I don’t…” Char sucked in a breath through her teeth, and then—clearly forcing herself against her will—jerked her head up to look at Chariot. “You said ‘just say the word’, right, teach? All right, fine, you win. I’m saying the word. I want to stay at *Luna Nova* too, and….” Her breath hitched, and she took a moment to steady herself. “I think I’ve got a lot of ground I need to make up.”

“And like I told you, I’ll make sure you get all the help you need.” Chariot winked. “But you can do it. You’ve already taken the most difficult step.”

“Oh, of course. That’s the old saying, right?” Char snorted. “Being attacked by a giant fog monster is the first step?”

Chariot chuckled a little at that. “Sure, why not.”
Mani let out a breath, and she could feel that her heartbeat was finally making its way back down. “Wow,” she said, and took a deep breath. “I… I guess I’m glad we did that? But I don’t want to do it ever again.”

“Understandable. Neither do I.” Chariot clapped a hand on her shoulder. “Now come on, it’s getting late. I should be getting you two back to your dorm.”

“But—but I have so many questions!” Mani slipped free of Chariot’s hand and ran forward, under Woodward’s beatific gaze. “How long have you been here? How many people have done this trial? If you can see the future, then—then when will I really get a handle on my magic?” Another thought struck her, and she looked up at Woodward. “What can you tell us about Tiff’s friend?”

Woodward looked down at her, her expression unmoving. “I am not certain who ‘Tiff’ is, nor her friend.”

“Well, Tiffany is my roommate, and she has this invisible friend—but she’s real, just invisible—and according to Tiffany she’s one of the Nine Olde Witches, so it makes sense that you would know her, right?” Mani frowned, noticing that Woodward’s eyes seemed to be widening, just a bit. “She’s trapped inside a legendary broom, and apparently her name is—”

Woodward’s head snapped forward. The expression on her face wasn’t beatific. It was dumbfounded. “You,” she whispered, at someone Mani couldn’t see.
Tiff had followed her friends into the forest, as best as she could manage. She’d lost sight of them in all the trees, but eventually she’d gotten her bearings in time to find them in a small clearing—objectively not that small, but compared to the massive size of the forest, it might as well have been a soap bubble in the ocean.

She’d seen Professor Chariot tense up, and begin a warning to her friends, only to be flung from the clearing into the darkness by some unseen force. She’d shouted out, and tried to dash forward on her broom as the fog surged up—

“Chill, chill, chill, chill, chill!”

Only for a hand to clamp around her mouth, and another to grab her back, yanking her down into the canopy.

Tiff grunted, less in pain than surprise, as the pressure forced her to land on a branch overlooking the clearing, and all the horrors that lay within. “It’s fine!” said the voice. “It’s only Woodward! Let her work!”

She turned to the voice’s source and saw—“Scarlette?” she hissed, once the hand was off her mouth.

“Don’t worry, this is just the way she tests her students.” Scarlette was hovering beside her on the Shooting Star, still holding the back of Tiffany’s coat. The glowing lines of her eyes stared right into Tiffany’s own, and a red curve formed a smile below. “You would not have liked her midterms, let me tell you. But your friends are not in danger.”

Tiff took a breath. “So—”

“Your friends are fine. I mean—” Scarlette rolled her eyes “—they kinda suck, so I don’t see them passing the exam, but maybe they can make it work. Who knows?”

“You came back.”

Tiffany wasn’t really sure why that was the first thing on her mind—her friends were out in the clearing and Professor Chariot had vanished, and Professor Woodward seemed to be… well, it didn’t look like any test Tiffany had ever seen. In any case, Scarlette flinched and didn’t keep talking immediately, as if she’d fumbled her next words inside her head. “Well, duh,” she finally said. “I had to make sure that you didn’t interfere.”

“You came back just to stop me from getting in the way of some test?”

“Hey, I’m the Shooting Star. And an Olde Witch.” Scarlette huffed and turned to the side, crossing her arms. “And I can do whatever for whatever reason.”

Tiff stared at her, and she resolutely refused to look back for several seconds, but she finally had to let out a sigh. “It’s different now than when I was a broom. Sure, nobody could hear me, but I couldn’t talk. I really couldn’t think. But now I can, and… well, it sucks to be alone, okay?”
“Sorry?” Tiff found herself smiling a little. She leaned forward. “What was that?”

“I’m not repeating it.”

“It just almost sounds,” Tiff said, cupping a hand over her ear, “as if you need me or something—”

“Shut up and watch the lightshow!”

It was pretty clear to Tiff that if Scarlette still had cheeks in the traditional sense, they’d be blushing. Tiff rolled her eyes, but returned her attention to the drama playing out in the clearing.

It was pretty intense. The fog monster—apparently the Professor Woodward, of the Nine Olde Witches, in disguise?—had Char trapped in some sort of whirling vortex, and also an energy barrier. Mani was alternately being enticed with an offer to go home, and bullied about not being able to use magic properly. Tiff’s hands tightened around her branch, and she gritted her teeth—but if this really was Professor Woodward, then it had to be for a reason. One of the Nine Olde Witches didn’t just insult someone for no reason.

She glanced over at Scarlette, and adjusted that statement in her head: most of the Nine Olde Witches didn’t just insult someone for no reason.

In any case, just as it seemed like Mani might be about to give in—

“Mani! I need help!”

—Char, at last, admitted she needed a hand. “Finally,” Tiffany groaned. “I’ve been trying to get her to do that forever.”

And Mani responded pretty well, in Tiff’s opinion. She blasted the fog monster in the face, and then turned to deal with the vortex around Char, and—Tiff leaned forward closer, to get a better view—something seemed to have clicked for Mani. She was using her wand like the tool it was, not the firecracker she always treated it like, and with an exceptional application of the Light Knife spell she cut away the vortex trapping Char. She ran in, took Char’s hand, and pulled her out.

Scarlette sucked in a breath, somehow. “All right,” she said, “I guess that they’re okay.”

Tiff shot her a glare. “Seriously? That’s what it took to change your mind?”

“If Woody thinks they’re good, then they are good.” Scarlette snorted. “She knows whereof she speaks, okay?”

Mani let out some more blasts at the fog monster, and then Professor Chariot—who had been fine all along, what a shocker—rushed in to stop her, and started explaining everything, and somewhere in the middle Woodward transformed into what Tiff could only assume was her true form. “She’s beautiful,” Tiffany whispered.

“That’s Woody for ya.” Scarlette grinned, but then let out a little whine. “When will they be done?”

“What do you mean? Also, Woody?”

“I wanna talk to her!”

Mani and Char were talking now, and Tiff used an amplification spell on her ears to make sure she heard. And what she did hear practically made her heart glow: Mani wasn’t going to leave Luna
Nova, and Char was going to do her best not to get kicked out. “Thank you,” she whispered, bowing her head. “Thank you.”

She looked up when she felt Scarlette tapping her shoulder. “All right, they’re wrapping up. I’m gonna go!”

And before Tiff could respond, Scarlette zoomed out of the trees and yelled, “Hey, Woody!”

All movement in the clearing stopped. All eyes turned toward the Shooting Star—which, for most of them, wouldn’t look like anything more than the broom itself. But Professor Woodward wasn’t staring at the broom: she was staring above it, where Scarlette stood with her hands cupped around her mouth. “Guess who’s baaaaack!” She waited for a bit, as if she actually wanted Woodward to guess.

But all Professor Woodward said was, “You.”

“Eh, close enough. It’s me! Scarlette! Hello!” She waved enthusiastically enough that she almost lost her balance on the broom: it swerved under her. “And you can see me, too! That’s awesome! It’s so, so good to see you!”

“Scarlette,” Woodward breathed, gliding closer. Her face was blank of all emotion. From the ground beneath the Shooting Star, a thousand slim wooden shoots sprouted. “You’ve returned.”

“Yup, it’s me!” Scarlette looked down, then let the Shooting Star sink to meet the rising pedestal of wood: she sat down into it. “Oh, thanks for that. It’s nice to have a seat. And hey, you’re hugging me!” she added, because some of the shoots were curling their way around the Shooting Star’s handle. “That’s nice!”

“After all this time....” Still with that strange, blank expression on her face, Professor Woodward beckoned upward with a hand, and the mass of wood—for the thousand sprouts had twisted into a single monolith by now—raised Scarlette to her eye level. “For you to come back here, to Luna Nova....”

And Tiffany’s breath caught. A thousand voices in her head screamed that something was horribly wrong.

“Wow, okay.” Scarlette laughed. “Hey, Woody, can you ease up on the plants? Your hug’s a... little tight....” As the bits of wood wound more and more around the Shooting Star, they thickened, and Scarlette’s voice was strained.

Professor Woodward’s face was changing. Lines appeared where before the skin had been unblemished; the glow of her spiritual form diminished; the shape of her eyes changed, angled. “How dare you,” she said.

Scarlette froze. “Uh... Woody—”

There was a sound of shifting, and Scarlette gasped: the pedestal of wood buckled beneath her to become a wedge, and the Shooting Star was balanced upon its edge like a seesaw. A hundred little sprouts of wood were on either side, pulling the Shooting Star down, bending it. Trying to shatter it.

“Woody?” Scarlette gasped, backing away as far as she could—but she still had to touch the Shooting Star, so she couldn’t go far. “Hey, what’s going on?” She grabbed at the Shooting Star, tried to tug it away, but it didn’t budge: Woodward’s hold was too tight.
“Isn’t it obvious? I’m doing what I should have done, fifteen hundred years ago.” Woodward wasn’t beautiful anymore. She was a monstrous creature of the trees, and she towered over Scarlette, watching coldly as the Shooting Star creaked under the pressure. Around her, the other three witches in the clearing—Mani, Char, and Professor Chariot—were watching in shock, maybe even horror.

But they weren’t doing anything. Why weren’t they doing anything?

“Woody, stop.” Scarlette’s voice was hitching. “What did I even do?”

“What did you DO?” The voice wasn’t cold, all of a sudden. Woodward leaned further over Scarlette, almost looking directly down. “Don’t speak as if you do not KNOW!”

“Please,” Scarlette gasped, before her corporeal form vanished.

And something snapped inside Tiffany, something that she wouldn’t be able to describe until later. But all of a sudden, it wasn’t a member of the Nine Olde Witches doling out some punishment. It was a monster attacking her friend.

“Tia freyre!” she yelled, still holding her broom, and burst from the treeline. She held out her wand and roared the first spell that came to mind: “Foraen murowa!”

When she’d tried putting this spell together before, it had resulted in a thin sliver of light. Now, a putrid green torrent burst from her wand, and blasted straight into the wedge trying to snap Scarlette in half. Where it struck, rot and decay spread out from the impact, and within seconds it was leaving a foul, dead crater as the wood shriveled away.

“What?” Woodward said, and focused her attention on Tiffany. “What are you doing?” From the ground below came more growth, surging up to the height of the Shooting Star, trying to apply more pressure. Tiffany gritted her teeth, and grabbed her wand with both hands, and forced every ounce of magic in her body into the spell. Just a little longer. Just a little longer—

The decay reached the top of the wedge, and the hundreds of roots wrapped around the Shooting Star withered, and their hold slackened. With a snapping of wood, the Shooting Star ripped its way forward, and burst into the sky, and zoomed away into the clouds. She was gone. Scarlette was safe.

Tiff released the spell, and her eyes rolled up, and she almost fell the full distance to the ground. Only her tenuous hold upon her broom was enough to guide her safely down. “Oh my god,” she whispered, heaving big breaths as the world got hazy around her. “Oh my god.”

“Tiff!” That was… someone’s voice, and someone’s footsteps, running toward her. It took a few seconds for her brain to assign a name to the voice, and by that time, Mani had already reached her and was helping her up. “Are you okay?”

“I’m….” Tiff sucked down another huge breath, and then Char was on her other side, helping her up. She leaned on her broom for support, like a crutch. “I think I’m….”

And she might have said ‘okay’, except that she chose that moment to look up. Professor Woodward was returning to her original, beautiful form, and Professor Woodward was staring directly at her. The switch in her head flipped back, and she realized a few things. Namely:

She had just attacked an Olde Witch.

She had just attacked an Olde Witch.
She had just jumped out of the trees, pulled out her wand, and *used it to attack an Olde Witch*.

“Hello,” she squeaked, her pupils as thin as pinpricks. “It’s an honor?”

Woodward stared at her. It was clear that she was trying to be as impassive as before. It was also clear that she was failing. The rage that Tiffany had seen when she’d tried to—tried to *snap* Scarlette, it was still flickering under a paper-thin surface.

“That was… that was a test, right?” Tiffany’s voice was still an octave higher than normal. “Like, you knew that I was there, and you, and you were trying to get me to learn some sort of life lesson or, or….”

She didn’t believe it either. Then she yelped: the floor of the clearing was shifting beneath her, and it raised her up on the same kind of pedestal that had ensnared Scarlette. Tiffany looked frantically down at her feet, but nothing seemed to be curling around them to trap her. At least, nothing *yet*.

“You are ‘Tiff’,” Woodward said, staring down at her, “*and your… friend… is the Olde Witch Scarlette?”*

Tiff’s throat seemed to close up. She nodded.

Woodward leaned closer. “*Tiffany,*” she said, her eyes burning with light, “*I will say this only once. Scarlette’s is an accursed existence. Leave her, and do not look back.*”

But Tiffany’s teeth gritted. “*Why,*” she whispered, and then coughed, clearing her throat as best as she could. “*Why should I? She* never tried to snap someone in two, just for the crime of saying hello! And you didn’t even tell her what she *did* that was so bad! Can you explain yourself at all!?*”

Woodward stared at her, and somehow, against all odds, Tiff stared right back.

And then Tiffany was sinking. The growth of wood beneath her was sublimating back into the ground, and Woodward turned away. “*Chariot,*” she said, her voice emotionless once more. “*Guide them to the castle.*” And then, before Tiffany’s eyes, Woodward vanished—her body crumbling into leaves that blew away on a sudden gust of wind.

“Y-y-y-yes, Professor!” Chariot stammered. “Come on, girls, we’ve gotta go.”

Tiff just kept staring into the clearing. She was sure that, beside her, Mani and Char were doing the same thing.

“I said *come on, girls!*” Two short claps caught Tiff’s attention at last, and she looked over to see Chariot with the most incredibly tense expression she’d ever seen on a human face. “We need to go!”

It was the awkwardness, more than the authority, that got Tiffany and her friends to start walking. Chariot led them back into the forest, toward the shape of Luna Nova that was only barely visible over the treetops of the clearing. “Hey,” Tiffany said. “Are you two okay? I saw what she put you through.”

“What?” Char groaned. “And you just *watched*?”

“I knew it was Professor Woodward. I thought she knew what she was doing. I’m….” Tiff sucked in a breath. “*Not* so sure anymore.”

Char sighed. “Well… I think I’m okay. Actually, scratch that, I know I’m not okay. Which is kind
“Of more important?” She let out another groan. “This is gonna suck.”

“What, actually doing work?” Tiffany snorted at that, and then regretted it a second later: Char’s face wasn’t very visible in the gloom of the forest, but she looked more than usually troubled. “You can do this,” Tiffany said, offering a smile. “We’re all right behind you.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Mani?” Tiff added, looking to her other side.

Mani gulped. “I’m… I’m actually doing pretty well, I think. When you consider everything.” She looked Tiffany in the eyes. “What about you?”

“I’m….” Tiffany frowned. Everything that had stressed her out for the past week seemed to have vanished, and yet it also felt like a thousand new things had come up. Never a dull moment at Luna Nova, eh? “I’m… not sure. But I’m glad you two are staying.” She swung out an arm over both her friend’s shoulders. “We’ve gotta stick together, right?”

“Always,” Char said, throwing an arm over her shoulder in turn. Mani smiled, and followed suit.

And then Tiff tripped over a tree branch and they all fell on their faces.

“Welp,” Char grunted into the ground, “could have seen that coming.”

Tiff snorted. “Sorry.”

They all got to their respective pairs of feet. “By the way,” Tiff said, “and I know this is going to sound weird, but… I had another idea for the project….”

After about ten more minutes, just when Chariot was about to worry they’d gotten lost, they emerged once more onto the grounds of Luna Nova.

As soon as they did, and before Chariot could direct them to go on to the school, Tiff pointed up. “There she is!”

Chariot looked up, and saw a flash of red in the sky.

“I’m going to talk to her,” Tiffany said. “Tia freyre!” Before Chariot could respond, she was already kicking off the ground and rising into the sky, tailing the Shooting Star. They both appeared to be headed for the dormitories, though, so Chariot supposed she didn’t actually have to reprimand the girl.

She sighed, and turned to face the other two. “Well,” she said, “I think you can make it the rest of the way on your own. See you both tomorrow!”

“Good night!” Mani said, offering a little wave. Char offered the wave but not the words, and then the two of them ran off to the school.

Once the girls had made it inside the castle, Chariot leaned against the nearest tree. “So,” she said, in a low tone, crossing her arms. “Do you mind explaining, one teacher to another, what the hell just happened?”
Professor Woodward did not reappear. However, all around Chariot, the wind picked up and leaves blew past. Then the voice echoed in, as if borne from miles away: “There are some things I must tell you, and some… fears, of which I dare not speak, lest they come to pass. Chariot, you must watch them. Do not let the mistakes of millennia past come round again.”

“What does that mean?” Chariot turned around, facing an empty forest. “If that broom is somehow a threat to my students, then you need to tell me, now! And if it’s not, then I’d like to know why you just attacked a fellow Olde Witch!”

“Some truths cannot be spoken. But….”

Wind whirled around her, flattening the grass in a circle, and Chariot looked up. The skies were clearing above her, opening up like the eye of a hurricane, and showing the constellations beyond.

“Something is rotten in the stars, Chariot. Seek it.”

And the wind died down, and Chariot knew she was alone again. She slid down the trunk of the tree until she was sitting on the ground, just trying to give herself some time to process, to puzzle out some meaning. Rotten in the stars? Her gaze went skyward—

“You know, if I had a euro for every time that old hag’s ever given a straight answer, I’d be bankrupt.”

The voice was flippant, but Chariot could tell that was just a cover for the anger. “Croix,” she said, standing up and turning around to see the hologram. “Where have you been?”

“Watching the show.” Croix smiled. It was not a happy smile. “Can I just say—just off the cuff, as another one of her erstwhile students—that it is pure bliss to see someone stand up to our dear old Professor Woodward for once? To see someone knock the all-knowing look right off the face of that self-righteous—”

“Croix,” Chariot warned, walking closer. “She’s wiser than any other witch alive or dead. Whatever she did, she must have had a good reason—”

“You really sounded so convinced of that a moment ago, when you were yelling at her.”

There was poison in those words, seeping out of a body full of it. Chariot sucked in a breath. “I thought….” She reached out, then let her hand drop. It wasn’t as if she could touch Croix right now. “After all this time? You’re still not ready to move on?”


Pain, Chariot realized. What she was seeing in Croix’s posture wasn’t smug superiority. It was pain.

But before she could say anything about it, Croix’s hologram winked away, and the droid flew into the sky. Chariot ran forward a few steps, realized it was pointless, and stopped.

“Rotten in the stars,” she murmured, and gazed up to scrutinize the cosmos.
When Tiff got up to her dorm room, via a window that apparently no one had remembered to close—honestly, what if a bat had gotten in or something?—she didn’t have to look hard to find Scarlette. The girl was sitting at the top of Tiffany’s ladder, hunched over, with her head in her hands.

She didn’t look like she wanted to move. Frankly, she didn’t look like she’d move even if the bed collapsed out from underneath her. So Tiffany, still riding her own broom, maneuvered herself through three-dimensional space until she was over the railing of her bed, and then let go of her broom. She sat down crosslegged on her mattress, next to Scarlette, and on the Shooting Star that had landed flat across the top of the covers.

Scarlette wasn’t moving at all, she realized. She didn’t even seem to be breathing, not that she would need to. She just sat there with her face in her hands.

Tiffany reached her hand down and ran it along the length of the Shooting Star. “Did she hurt you?” she said, trying to feel anywhere that the wood might have splintered. It felt smooth under her fingertips, but maybe something had been weakened internally.

A few seconds later, Scarlette sniffed. “Go away.”

“You are literally blocking the ladder—”

Scarlette shifted to the side, folding herself up as tightly as possible atop Tiffany’s pillow.

“—and I’m not going to go away after what just happened.”

“You shouldn’t be around me, Tiffany,” Scarlette said. Her voice was so quiet that Tiffany could hardly hear it.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m a bad person.”

Tiffany squinted. “You’re a what?”

Scarlette’s projection winked out for a moment. When she reappeared, she was facing the corner directly, head back in her hands. “Woody knows people. If she says that your friends are good, then they’re good. Me?” Her breath hitched. “She just attacked me. She tried to destroy me. So she knows I’m a bad person.”

“And….” Tiffany crawled closer on the bed, wincing as the weight of her knee pressed against the unyielding wood of the Star. “You still don’t know what you did that was so bad?”

Scarlette shook her head. “I’ve still got missing pieces, remember? It could be anything. But I must have been awful.”

Tiff stared at her. Scarlette was so small, she barely needed to bow her head to fit under the ceiling. And the way she hunched in on herself made her look even smaller than that. She was shivering, she was afraid, and worst of all—she was clearly trying to hide it. She really was trying to control the shaking in her voice, trying not to let Tiff see her face.

At that moment, maybe for the second time or maybe instead for the first, Scarlette didn’t look like an olde witch in any sense of the term. She looked, and acted, no older than the twelve years of her body.
So how should you treat a twelve year old?

“Then….” Tiffany gritted her teeth. “Then to heck with her.”

Scarlette looked up. Tiff grabbed her by the shoulder—gently, not roughly—and pulled, so that she was looking at Scarlette directly. “What, so she… she thinks you did something terrible, but she won’t even tell you? And she expects you to feel guilty about that? To heck with her! If she can’t even tell you what you did that was so bad, then she can darn well leave you alone!”

“But—”

“No buts!” Tiff held Scarlette by both shoulders and looked into her eyes. “The Scarlette I’m looking at, right now, she didn’t do anything worth being killed over. You didn’t deserve that. Do you understand me?”

Scarlette looked back, shivering. “And… what if you find the rest of me, and… and we find out it was really bad?”

Tiff shook her head. “Whatever it is, I’m not going to go away, okay? I’m not going to leave you alone.”

Scarlette stared at her. And then she threw herself against Tiffany, sobbing, gripping her tight like a life preserver. “I’m sorry,” she sobbed, “I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m so sorry—”

“It’s okay.”

“I just wanted you to think I was cool, I wanted you to think I was so cool because if your other friends were cooler than me then you’d spend time with them and not me and, and—and I can’t talk to anyone!” She sucked in a huge, wailing breath. “You’re the only one I can talk to and, and it’s so lonely—and if you didn’t think I was cool, you’d just—I don’t wanna be alone anymore—”

“Ssh.” Tiffany clutched her close. “It’s okay.”

“You’ve helped me so much already and I’ve been so mean, and I insulted you and I insulted your friends—”

Tiffany ran a hand through the girl’s hair, stroking it.

“I’m sorry I’m a bad friend,” Scarlette said into her shirt, crying tears of light that left no moisture. “Please don’t leave.”

“Of course. It’s okay. Ssh, it’s okay.”

She kept talking like that, murmuring sweet nothings to the girl in front of her, letting her hold on tight even as it became uncomfortable. And when she couldn’t think of anything more to say, she hummed the lullaby her mother had always sung to her. After minutes of this, Tiff didn’t know how many, Scarlette’s breathing became quieter, more regular. Her grip relaxed a bit. If Tiffany didn’t know better, she’d say the girl was falling asleep.

It was like she’d suddenly gotten a little sister.

Tiff stayed still, assiduously unmoving, until she heard a pointed clearing of the throat from beneath her. When she looked down, Char and Mani were at the doorway. “I assume,” Char said, smirking a little, “that we’re interrupting a big emotional moment? But you could also just be screwing with us, and we would never know.”
Tiff snorted, craning her neck to see them better. “Would I really do that?”

Char pursed her lips, then shook her head. “Nah. You’re not that funny.”

She walked into the room and rolled onto her bed beneath Tiff. Mani followed suit upon her own bed. “Is Scarlette okay?” she said, looking worriedly at the place she seemed to guess Scarlette would be.

Tiffany nodded. “She’s pretty rattled, but I think she’ll be fine.”

Scarlette winced a little, her face still hidden in Tiffany’s front. “Please say I’m sorry for the things I said.”

“Scarlette, they never actually heard you—”

“Please say it anyway.”

“Oh, fine.” Tiffany leaned down. “Scarlette says she’s sorry for some things she said about you both, which you never heard, and which I will not repeat. But she’s very sorry.”

“Oh!” Mani didn’t seem to know how to respond to that, which Tiffany thought was very fair: after a few seconds, she nodded. “That’s fine! And actually, tell her… no, she can hear me—maybe, the next time we do that spin the bottle game… you could play too, Scarlette?”

Scarlette perked up at that. “Really?” she said, looking down at Mani. Her voice was a lot clearer, but it hitched a little even so.

“She says, ‘Really?’”

“If everyone else is okay with it, sure,” Mani said.

“No problems here,” Char added. “Four’s better than three.”

“Thank you!” Scarlette punched the air. “I am gonna win so hard!”

“She says thank you,” Tiffany said, rolling her eyes, “and also she doesn’t seem to understand how the game works.”

“That’s okay, I didn’t either.” Mani shrugged. “So… what you were saying before, about the project….”

“Next up,” Professor Badcock said, examining her papers, “is Black Team, led by… Vandergard. Miss Vandergard, would you care to bring your group down?”

“Certainly!” Tiff called out, springing to her feet. She skipped down the stairs to the front of the class, holding a potted plant in her hands. With only a few inches of stem and two little leaves, it was not a large potted plant—yet.

With great care she placed it down in the center of the lecture space, and then looked back to see Mani and Char following. Char had her brooms in her hand, and Mani was just holding her wand, tapping it idly against her hand. The focus on her face was clear. “Coming through,” Char said, and
opened up her broomock to lie down on it. “Tia freyre.”

“*Young lady,*” Professor Badcock began.

Tiffany waved her off. “It’s for the presentation, Professor, don’t worry.”

Char spun in place, so that her head was pointed at the plant, and then backed up. “*Beep,*” she said, “beep, beep.” Oh, Tiffany realized, like a truck. She snorted.

“Ready?” Tiffany said. Char nodded, so Tiffany directed her gaze to Mani. “Go!”

Mani took a deep breath, and pointed her wand at the plant. “*Foraen mugrowna!*” And it *erupted.* From the tiny little sprout of a plant grew a huge trunk, and a tangle of stems and leaves and branches, and within a second it filled the front of the room and brushed against the ceiling—but what would have been out of control for someone else was not out of control for herl. Mani, still with a look of absolute concentration on her face, squeezed her wand, throttling the spell and then ending it.

“Oh, no,” Char said, thoroughly tangled in the plant. “I have become thoroughly tangled in this plant. Which could be a mandrake or something, in the fiction of this demonstration. Ah. Help me. I’m dying.”

All told, Tiff really wished she would put a little more energy into the acting. That was all right, though: Tiff had enough dramatic flair for the both of them. “Don’t worry, Char!” she yelled, striking a pose and pointing at the plant. “I’ll save you!” She turned and ran away, leaping off the nearest desk—and causing the students sitting there to flinch—and she yelled, “*Now!*”

The Shooting Star burst from its resting place under her own desk, and maneuvered itself under Tiffany’s feet, letting her land upon it. Was this strictly required for the demonstration? No. Did it look cool? *Heck yes.* “Begone, plant monster!” Tiff said, surfing her way in an arc through the air that ended with the Star pointed directly at Char and the plant. Tiffany leveled her wand at the plant and yelled, “*Foraen murowa!*”

The toxic green stream of magic burst from her wand and struck the plant, and before the eyes of the assembled onlookers, it shriveled. Leaves shrunk and turned gray; branches splintered and cracked; and within a few seconds, Char was free, and the plant was back to its previous tiny size, looking particularly worse for wear. “Yay,” Char said, sliding off her broom to stand on both feet. “You saved me.”

“You’re very welcome!” Tiff surfed the Shooting Star back to the front of the class, and hopped off. “*Foraen murowa,* the plant killing spell,” she declared to the class. “For clearing out any pesky vegetation in your area, today!” She took Mani’s and Char’s hands and tugged them downward into a three person bow.

None of her classmates clapped—she hadn’t really expected them to—but she heard some applause from her side, and looked to see that Scarlette had manifested, clapping enthusiastically. Tiffany smiled at her.

“Hmm.” Badcock adjusted her glasses. “Basic, very basic. But you performed it well and demonstrated clear utility. B for all of you.”

“Woo!” Tiff pumped the air.

“Provided you clean up all this mess,” Badcock continued, gesturing around them. The thousand little bits of dead plant had fallen to the floor in a wide radius, and they kind of stank.
“Oh, yeah, right!” Feeling a little sheepish, but nowhere near as much as she felt triumphant, Tiffany conjured a big magic bag with her wand before drawing all of the dead plant matter into a vortex, and stuffing them into the bag.

“Next up, Z for Zhaparov….”

As Tiff hefted the bag of dead plants back to her desk, she couldn’t help but glance at Alice—who looked like she was trying not to pay attention, and failing. Tiffany offered her a blown raspberry. Then she finished walking to her desk, with Char and Mani right behind her and Scarlette floating above them.

A moment after they sat down, Tiff put her hand out with the palm up, and Mani and Char high fived them. After a moment, so did Scarlette.

“My turn!”

Scarlette, who had just answered a question about the weirdest thing she’d ever eaten with a description of a food that apparently no longer existed, grabbed the Shooting Star and used it to spin the bottle again. Once more, it turned into a blur. “Stop that!” Mani whined. “You’re going to tear up my blanket!”

When the bottle finally stopped, ten seconds later, it was pointed at Char. “Okay, Char!” Scarlette said, pointing at the witch across from her in the square they’d made on Mani’s bed. “Choose truth or dare!” Tiff, sitting next to her, dutifully repeated every word.

“Uh…” Char, who was leaning against Mani’s headboard, shrugged. “Truth.” Mani, sitting next to her, raised an eyebrow at that.

“Speak a truth about yourself that no one else here knows!”

“Do you have to phrase it so archaically?” Tiff asked, but she sighed and repeated that too.

“Something no one here knows…” Char frowned. “Uh… I was top of my class in middle school. Like, by a lot.”

Tiff’s eyes widened, and she leaned forward. “You?”

“Hey, it was easy. I didn’t even have to try.”

“Is that why you’ve been struggling at Luna Nova?” Tiff reached out with a hand, before letting it fall back down. “You didn’t know how to study? I can show you some tips—”

“Sure, let’s go with that.” Char rolled her eyes. “Also, it’s not like there was a Sorcerer’s Stone around back home—like, I was already a witch, but there wasn’t any magic to do, so I didn’t really practice a lot.” She pouted. “And then some dumb-dumb brought it back.”

Mani grimaced. “Can we not bring up that… dumb-dumb right now?”

Char squinted at her, but shrugged. “Ah, good point. You and her aren’t good anymore, yeah?”

“I’m not sure…” Mani grimaced. “I… need to think about it. I might owe her an apology.”
“Well, save it for later. It’s my turn to spin, and we are getting in as much fun as possible before I need to do homework again.” Char leaned forward, grabbed the bottle, and spun it. “Tiff,” she said when it stopped, “truth or dare?”

“Truth!” Tiffany said. And then her eyes widened. “No, no, I meant—”

“No backsies,” Char said, an evil smile on her face. “So. Who do you have a crush on?”

“Noo!”

The previous night.
Scarlette was back.

Woodward stared into the stars, alone in the clearing. She’d known, in theory, that Scarlette could return at any point. But knowing that abstract fact didn’t get her ethereal form boiling in quite the same way as seeing Scarlette for herself.

Her jaw clenched, and for a moment she wondered whether she ought to follow the students back to Luna Nova, find Scarlette again, and put a stop to this—but right now, the traitor was powerless. And perhaps some time spent with mortals might do her some good.

Woodward would have to do what she did best: wait and see—

“Found you!”

Making the usual amount of effort not to look startled, Professor Woodward looked down at the edge of the clearing. Three small figures were emerging, and the closest of them was on some sort of strange scooter that certainly could not have been easy to use in the woods. “You know, I thought this tracking spell might not be working correctly,” she said. “I thought it was just leading me back to the Triskelion itself, not to the sources of its power, but—here you are! You’re Professor Woodward! In the… probably not the flesh, but whatever spirits are made of! Ectoplasm?”

Behind her, the two other girls were looking on with abject awe. The girl in front, on the other hand, seemed excited to be sure—but there wasn’t a trace of reverence to be found in her countenance.

It required a little more effort than usual for Woodward to maintain her neutral expression. Woodward was the one who found students—the students did not find her, or at least not on purpose. “I am Professor Woodward, yes,” she said, feeling the familiar echo of her words. “Who are you that presumes to seek me, and what do you desire of an Olde Witch?”

“Oh, me?” The girl inclined her head. “I’m Alice Gainesbury! And it’s nothing big, don’t worry. I was just wondering…. .”

She got off her scooter, pulled something out of a basket on the side, and walked closer. As Woodward peered down, she was able to see that the object was a large book—and that, on the front, a sigil of a triskelion had been engraved. Then the girl opened it up to a blank page and held it out, her expression filled with hunger.
“Can I have your autograph?”

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end of the arc, and of weekly updates for a while. Thanks for reading! I promise to have more as soon as I can manage!

In the meantime, check it out: I've got new art, courtesy of Hikarilie on Twitter!
In case it's not obvious: this is Char and Rain, respectively. I think Hikarillie did a really good job with this art, and I'm very grateful to them for their creativity!

I'd also like to reiterate my thanks to the talented HeCallsMeHisChild for being a wonderfully insightful prereader, as well as a source of constant support. This arc wouldn't be nearly what it is without her help. Thank you, Child!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!