

Episode 1: A Cherry Tomato

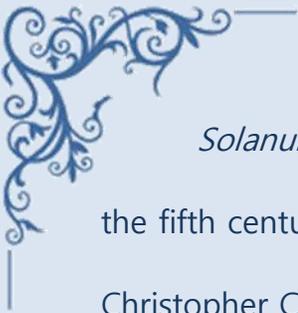
A cherry tomato.

That's what I want.

I've craved it for the entire cold, dark winter. The subtle pop as the marble-sized, red globe separates from the calyx. The delectable crunch between the teeth and the sweet explosion of tangy, blood-warm juice. A fresh-picked, sun-warmed, red, ripe cherry tomato.

But Spring is late and my spindly plants need more light. The sky today—as nearly every day of my exile—threatens a cold rain. I mound mud around the delicate stems, patting gently.





Solanum lycopersicum of the variety *cerasiforme* cultivated by the Aztecs in the fifth century and brought to Europe by Hernán Cortés in 1521—unless Christopher Columbus beat him to it nearly twenty years earlier—valued for soups and sauces, elegant in salads, and a distant relative of the deadly nightshade—belladonna—the witch’s herb. Hairy stem and dog-toothed leaves prickle my palm, their pungent odor a greeting and a warning.

A flutter in my belly reminds me I’ve crouched in the garden for far too long. I sit back on the soggy ground, lift my shirt, and inspect my distended abdomen. A tiny foot-shaped bulge blossoms beside my flattened, stretched navel. She doesn’t like being cramped and she’s not shy about letting me know.

With a rolling undulation from one side of my belly to the other, she curls into a comfortable ball. I caress the firm mound where she nestles just out of reach, moving my hand over her indistinct outline.

“Not long now,” I whisper to her.

“It will be alright,” I whisper to myself.

A chilly wind fingers the back of my neck. The fine hair on my arms prickles and a buzz in my head drowns out the cawing crows. Between one breath and the next, a vision rises from the garden mud. Beyond my control, these visions have visited me often in recent months-- horrifying replays of devastation and death.





The phantasm twists its tendrils in my hair before I can run, unfurls fronds of color and light and fear, holds me in a sticky embrace. All I can do is clutch the ragged tufts of last year's grass and hold on.

Episode 2: Burning

Flames fill the castle windows, acrid smoke streams from the turrets. Heat flushes my face, glitters in the crystals sewn into my gown, scorches me through the gauzy fabric. Soft ash filters onto my face and embers bounce across the gravel path between the castle keep and the gates.

Maddock is somewhere inside. I gather my skirts and trot toward the massive doors of the castle keep. We'll live or die together. The crystal slippers slide on gravel when a sharp warning cry rings out from above

"Run for the forest, Allium." Maddock stands atop the gate tower, a shadow against the moon-bright sky. "Run. I'll find you."

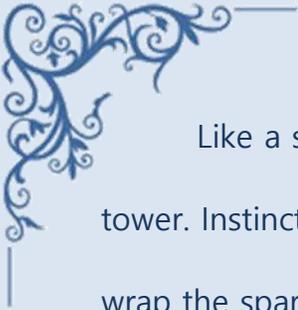
A gentle push on my back, a warm caress on my cheek—half fancied and half magic—and he is gone.

Despite his plea, I linger, mired in indecision.

Inside my head, Lucia's mocking voice repeats Maddock's words.

"Run, Allium. I'll find you. I'll find you both."





Like a strand of spider silk, Lucia's spell falls from the heights of the burning tower. Instinctively, my fingers coil above the pure, sweet atom of life in my belly. I wrap the spark in a satin shield, but Lucia's magic is potent. I can't hold the protective glamour for long. Escape is my only choice now.

Out the castle gates I fly. Magic snaps at my heels, loosed by a foe beyond my craft.

The broad road leading to the forest glimmers red, reflecting the fire. My discarded silver slippers flash as they tumble into rushing stream beside the road. I run for the dark, cool shadow of the forest. Gravel bites my bare feet. The train of the crystallized gown streams behind me, catching on stones and twigs. Not losing a step, I rip the delicate fabric and fling it aside. I run until my knees wobble and my breaths come in gasps.

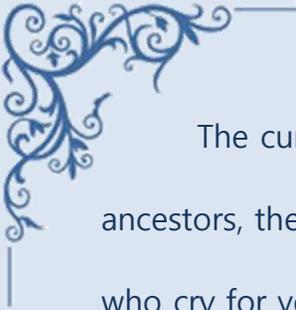
At last, sheltering branches spread over head at the forest's edge but I am spent.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to the tiny life huddled inside me.

Episode 3: Coils of Enchantment

Lucia's enchantment coils into the form of a snake, its head poised to strike. Above me, the creature rises. Its awful shadow blots out the moon, blots out the stars, consumes my last fragment of hope.





The curse I weave in that fractured second binds inside it the magic of my ancestors, the hatred of a hundred generations, the essence of a thousand souls who cry for vengeance. One final blaze before the eternal cold of death. One killing strike before darkness descends. My child and I will not die alone.

The laws of the Universe say such a curse will be visited back on me ten times but I don't care. I will be the handmaiden of Hecate who makes sure Lucia pays. Beyond that, I see only the void.

"Goodbye, Maddock, my love," I whisper.

In the distance, the castle shimmers with heat. No trace of Maddock reaches me through the ether. He may be dead already. My heart speaks to the sleeping spirit within my womb.

"Goodbye sweet child. I might have named you Zinnia or Petunia or Lavender or Pearl. If the Universe grants us a new life, perhaps we will meet there."

The curse perches on my tongue, but the will to speak withers into dust and blows away on a wintry gust. A tingle of ice on my neck, a tremor in time, a subtle shift of energy rocks the ground beneath me, shudders in the murky, smoke-thick air.

I'm too late.





Episode 4: Down, down, down

From outside the vision, I watch myself fall to the stony ground. Feel again the vibration of Earth and air. Steel gray clouds boil in a tumultuous sky and smoky wind tears my hair. But Lucia is not the author of this numbing spell.

Her threatening hex twists its venomous head toward the castle. With an impotent sigh, it crumbles into black ash. Residue filters through my hair, coats my upturned face, but the malice it once held is dead.

In the distance, the castle blazes to phosphorescent blue, each stone etched into stark relief by an iridescent indigo flash. A pulse of energy, a thunderous blast, and New Castle Highmoor winks out leaving a black hole in the night.

Gone. Dissolved in the ether.

With light-blind eyes and bated breath, I wait, hope and dread in equal portions. Did Maddock escape? My knees bleeding and my heart pounding, I stagger back toward the ghostly spiral of ozone marking the spot where the castle once stood. Wraithlike shrubs loom out of the darkness. Frightened night birds flutter across the path, call from the trees. What do they see that I do not?

I blink like an owl beneath a sky suddenly clear and calm and filled with stars and a westerly waning moon. Pale meadow flowers reflect the ghostly light, bob in the nightly zephyr. Neither lover nor foe waits in the darkness. Only a wisp of disorderly mist remains in the center of the wide plain.





"Allium!" His cry echoes far away, far away, far away. The vision fades to black.

With a racking gasp, I return to the garden. Dream images sift into the air like dandelion seeds in a spring breeze. The cold mud has seeped through my skirt and the hard stems of dead weeds cut into my hands. An earthy, pungent scent of dirt and tomato leaves penetrates the lingering odor of smoke.

Episode 5: Everything Changed

Twice, Lucia blasted the Darkmore and La Croix families nearly into oblivion. I was very young the first time, the memory a blur of panic and fear and grief. A thousand years later, Maddock and I intended to lay old ghosts to rest.

We hoped the formal dinner to celebrate our marriage would be a first step toward healing the rifts between our two families. Time, we hoped, had eroded their ancient fears. Intoxicated by our own joy, we invited everyone: La Croixs and Darkmores, those who remembered the Time Before along with the young ones who knew of such things only in legend.

My stately Celtic Darkmore relatives mixed with Maddock's New World La Croix family in an oddly familiar blend. I was only a child when Lucia destroyed Old Castle Highmoor and blew the alliance apart, but I remember peeping over the





banister from the upper level of the old castle on a throng much like this one on the last night of the Time Before.

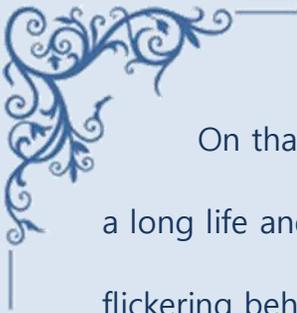
New Castle Highmoor, erected on the ruins of the old castle, was supposed to be a symbol of a new beginning. Nearly a thousand guests overflowed from the sumptuous drawing room of New Castle Highmoor to the elegant ballroom to the spacious veranda even spilled out into the verdant gardens. In the foyer, Maddock and I greeted each and every one.

Giggling cousins in brightly colored gowns cascaded down the steps into the garden, a bubbling tributary from the main concourse of matronly aunts in their finest brocades and portly uncles whose interests lay closer to the Scotch bottles and comfortable chairs in the drawing room.

All afternoon and into the evening, they came. Some drove modern cars or opted for traditional horse drawn carriages—equally impressive to manage in this secluded region. Others dispensed with pretense and materialized from dramatically boiling clouds of smoke or, more festive, alighted from gauzy spheres of purple magic.

Many extended a blessing for an abundance of children to their greetings and a private smile passed between Maddock and me. Our secret would be common knowledge soon enough but for now it was a sweet and intimate bond only we shared.





On that night months ago, I listened to a thousand versions of "may you have a long life and much happiness," grasped a thousand hands in welcome, noted fear flickering behind a thousand smiles. A millennium had not erased the terror associated with this valley.

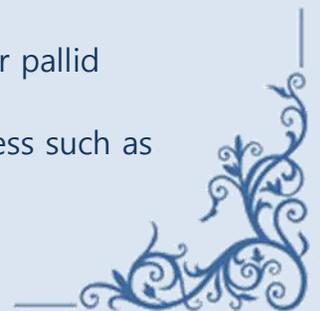
In our families, old habits die hard.

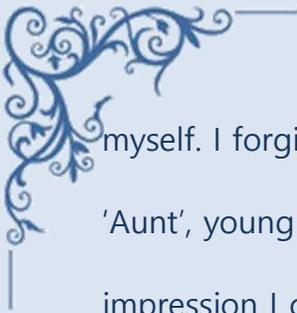
Episode 6: Fashionably Late

Fashionably late, Aunt Clarissa, the matriarch of my family, stepped regally from an elegant silver and gray coach drawn by four matched gray mares. Her burgundy brocade gown emphasized the gleaming green eyes and ivory skin for which we Darkmores are known. An onyx and diamond comb adorned her once blonde hair, now streaked with glittering strands of silver. Escorted by a young footman in sable livery, she ascended the seven steps to the broad veranda of Castle Highmoor and into the foyer like the queen she was. She extended a stiff hand to Maddock.

"A pleasure to welcome you to our home, Aunt," he murmured his voice dripping with charm. His blue eyes twinkled as he solemnly raised her pale claw to his lips. "You're by far the classiest dame here."

She snatched her hand away, but not before a blush rose on her pallid cheeks. "'Classy dame' is not an acceptable term for a powerful sorceress such as





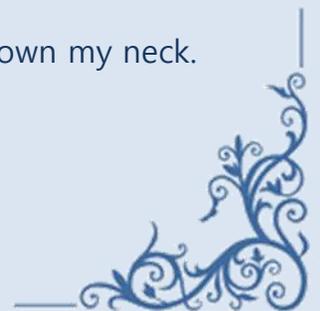
myself. I forgive it in light of the general festivities. But I'll thank you not to call me 'Aunt', young man. At least, not in front of all these people. You'll give them the impression I condone this union."

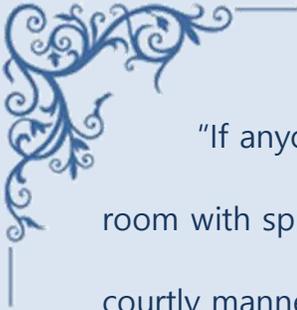
I hugged her tight, despite her protestations. "They'll never suspect a thing. It's only been a millennium since the Darkmores and the La Croixs broke bread together. I doubt most of them know who is who."

"Oh, they know. Watch them eye each other like hungry wolves. What's the old saying—keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Lucia's curse may have kept us separated in space, but even she can't control everything." Aunt Clarissa wriggled from my embrace and smoothed the brocade gown back in to place with perfectly manicured fingers. A satisfied smile curled her tinted lips. "And you two needn't look so smug. Your little secret won't be a secret for long. You're not the first couple to achieve such a thing. Now, point me in the direction of Aurora La Croix. It's been a thousand years since I laid eyes on her and I doubt she's aged as well as I."

Aunt Clarissa cocked an elegant and knowing eyebrow at us as she swept into the drawing room where raven-tressed Aurora La Croix sipped blood-red wine amidst an admiring throng of La Croix cousins.

"I'm never sure if she likes me or if she is simply humoring her favorite niece," Maddock whispered. His lips close to my ear sent a delicious tremor down my neck.





"If anyone else called her 'a classy dame' she'd turn him into a fly and fill the room with spiders. She likes you, alright. But you are exceptionally ignorant in courtly manners. I blame America." I smoothed the collar of his velvet jacket, ran my hands down his arms, enjoyed the feel of taut muscles beneath the garment.

Black magic simmered in his cool, blue eyes. "Touch me like that again, and I'll be forced to carry you upstairs, courtly manners be damned."

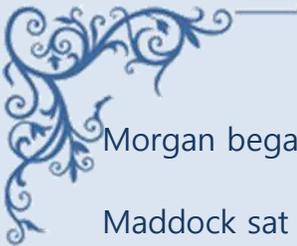
I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled his face to mine. "Scandalous. What will Aunt Clarissa say?"

Episode 7: Goblets of Fine, Old Wine

Goblets of very fine and very old wine delivered by a young and slightly inebriated La Croix cousin put an end to any thoughts of a clandestine rendezvous upstairs. Our duties as host and hostess called. At last, the long road leading from the forest to the castle lay empty and it was time to toast and mingle among our disparate relations. Copious amounts of wine and Scotch flowed from crystal carafes, and the murmur of voices grew to a cheerful din. The moon peeped in the western windows of New Castle Highmoor before our respective circuits brought us back together on the veranda.

"I've spent the better part the evening either tracing my lineage back to satisfy your relatives or tracing yours to satisfy mine. We should put it in a scroll;





Morgan begat Duncan and Duncan begat Caedmon and so on and so forth.”

Maddock sat his empty goblet on a handy tray and secured a full one in its place.

“Do you ever wish we were normal human beings with short life spans and limited imaginations? At least it would spare us the intrigue of ancient curses and temperamental witches.”

“If we were normal, we’d have been dead before we had a chance to meet again. I would remember you as a petulant pre-pubescent brat who thought it was funny to set the hair of elderly aunts on fire.”

“And I would remember you as the little snitch who told on me. It was difficult to concentrate on Aunt Clarissa’s lecture when her hair was still smoking. It’s my last fond memory of the Time Before.”

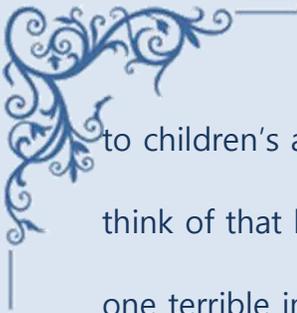
“Lucky for you Lucia stole the spotlight, or Aunt Clarissa would have thought up a proper punishment.”

A chill ran the length of my spine, prickling the hair on my arms and my neck. The festive lights, the chatter of conversation, the smell of a sumptuous dinner, and the subtle electromagnetic pull of the earth mirrored perfectly the night of Lucia’s Curse.

Episode 8: Hijinks in the Castle

The marriage of Lucia Darkmore and Avery LaCroix a thousand years ago had been my first formal event at Old Castle Highmoor. Even though I was relegated





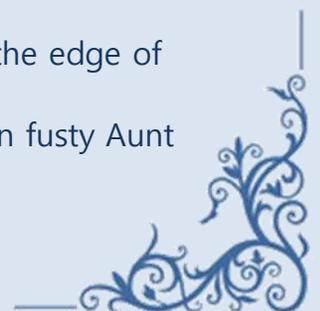
to children's activities, the splendor of the affair boggled my mind. Now, when I think of that last night, hideous cold and blinding flashes of icy blue light blur into one terrible image. It was the night Lucia divided the long history of the Darkmore and La Croix families into two parts: The Time Before and The Time After.

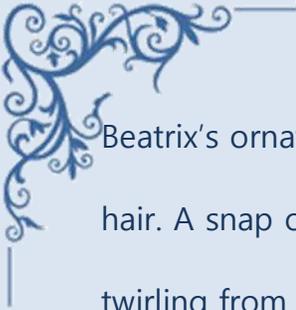
I'd been awake, snuggled with Elderberry, my stuffed dragon. I resented being sent to bed so early. Noise from the party below rose to the bedroom. When I heard Maddock and several of the older boys creeping through the upper hallway, I supposed they were up to something interesting. Leaving Elderberry safely tucked between the sheets, I pulled on my stockings and purloined the shawl of my sleeping nanny. The young conspirators didn't hear me follow them to the very edge of the stairway overlooking the foyer.

The wedding had been magnificent with festivities scheduled to continue for days, but children weren't allowed out of the upper portion of the castle without an attendant. Below us, the dinner bell rang and guests filtered across the foyer into the dining room for a late supper. Scents of roast beef and succulent ducks started my stomach grumbling though I'd stuffed myself at the children's meal earlier.

Maddock and his fellows gathered in a snickering knot, peeping over the railing on the crowd below. I crept closer.

From Maddock's outstretched fingers, a green spark kindled. With a flick of his finger, he sent it spinning toward the crowd below. I peeped over the edge of the banister and was as delighted as the boys to see the spark alight in fusty Aunt





Beatrix's ornate hairstyle. It smoldered at the very top of a mound of blue- tinted hair. A snap of Maddock's fingers extinguished the spark leaving a spiral of smoke twirling from the unsuspecting head. The boys dissolved in muffled giggles and so did I.

Maddock twisted to face me and put his finger to his lips.

"Be quiet, Darkmore child," he whispered. "Go back to bed."

Needless to say, I had no intention of abandoning such an interesting enterprise. I shook my head and made a face at him. I believe I said something along the lines of "Make me, why don't you."

"If you must stay, be quiet or we'll all be in for it," he warned, his eyebrows knitted ferociously above piercing blue eyes.

He turned back to his friends. I sidled closer and dangled my bare feet over the edge, enjoying the entertainment. So intense was our concentration on the scene below and the hapless victims of Maddock's masterful prank that we didn't hear Aunt Clarissa approach. She descended on us like an avenging goddess.

