

Episode 1: A Cherry Tomato

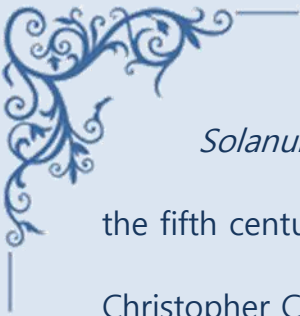
A cherry tomato.

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.

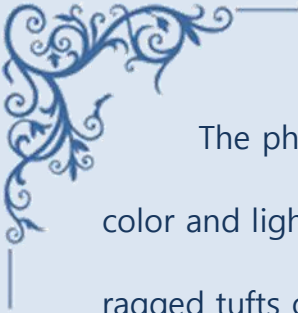
With a rolling undulation from one side of my belly to the other, she curls into a comfortable ball. I caress the firm mound where she nestles just out of reach, moving my hand over her indistinct outline.

“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."

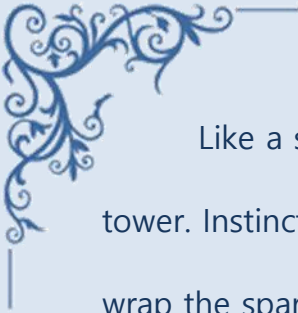
A gentle push on my back, a warm caress on my cheek—half fancied and half magic—and he is gone.

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.

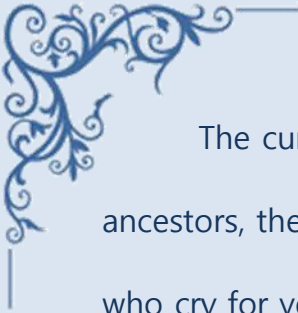
At last, sheltering branches spread over head at the forest's edge but I am spent.

"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. It's 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.

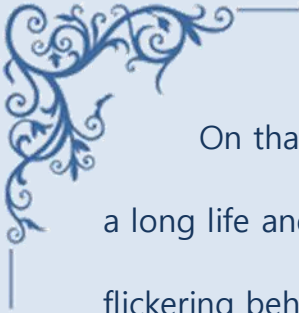
New Castle Highmoor, erected on the ruins of the old castle, was supposed to be a symbol of a new beginning. Nearly a thousand guests overflowed from the sumptuous drawing room of New Castle Highmoor to the elegant ballroom to the spacious veranda even spilled out into the verdant gardens. In the foyer,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

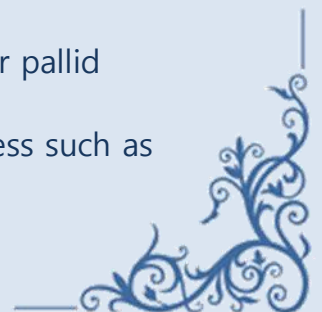
In our families, old habits die hard.

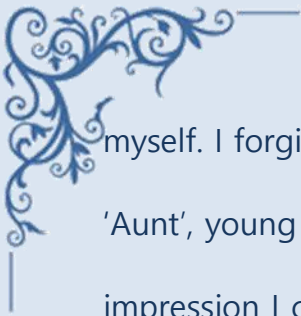
Episode 6: Fashionably Late

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





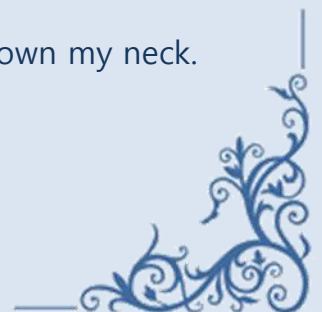
myself. I forgive it in light of the general festivities. But I'll thank you not to call me 'Aunt', young man. At least, not in front of all these people. You'll give them the impression I condone this union."

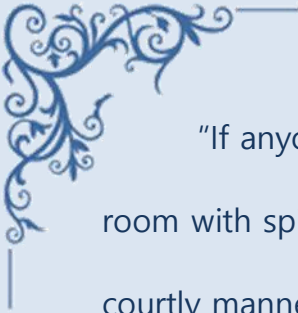
I hugged her tight, despite her protestations. "They'll never suspect a thing. It's only been a millennium since the Darkmores and the La Croixs broke bread together. I doubt most of them know who is who."

"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.

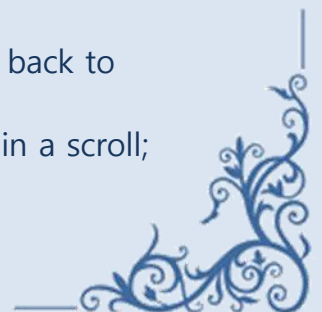
Black magic simmered in his cool, blue eyes. "Touch me like that again, and I'll be forced to carry you upstairs, courtly manners be damned."

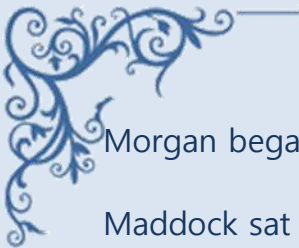
I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled his face to mine. "Scandalous. What will Aunt Clarissa say?"

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.”

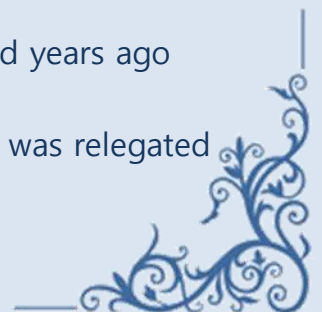
“And I would remember you as the little snitch who told on me. It was difficult to concentrate on Aunt Clarissa’s lecture when her hair was still smoking. It’s my last fond memory of the Time Before.”

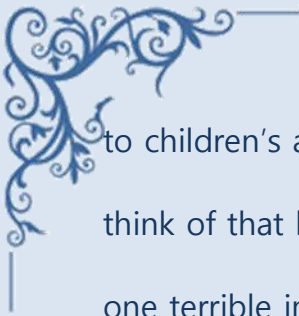
“Lucky for you Lucia stole the spotlight, or Aunt Clarissa would have thought up a proper punishment.”

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





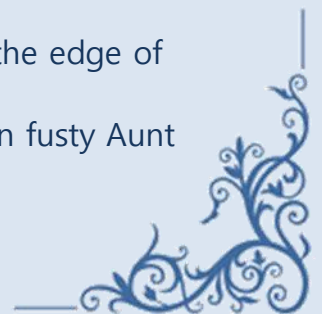
to children's activities, the splendor of the affair boggled my mind. Now, when I think of that last night, hideous cold and blinding flashes of icy blue light blur into one terrible image. It was the night Lucia divided the long history of the Darkmore and La Croix families into two parts: The Time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

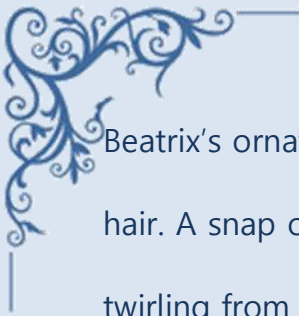
I'd been awake, snuggled with Elderberry, my stuffed dragon. I resented being sent to bed so early. Noise from the party below rose to the bedroom. When I heard Maddock and several of the older boys creeping through the upper hallway, I supposed they were up to something interesting. Leaving Elderberry 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.

Episode 9: Icy Curses

Aunt Clarissa always called me her favorite, but that didn't matter at this particular moment. She'd caught me conspiring with La Croix. I'd heard stories of such things—remnants of the long and divisive feud between the two families. None of those stories ended well.





"Allium," she said, eyeing me with a glittering green eye. "Which of these boys set Aunt Marzipan's hair on fire? The poor thing is crying her eyes out from embarrassment in the drawing room."

Maddock made a face like a thundercloud, but Aunt Clarissa was more intimidating by far. Wide eyed and afraid, I pointed a trembling finger at him.

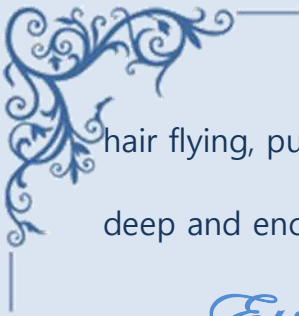
Below us, all the guests were just starting dinner—Lucia and Avery's first dinner as man and wife. I stood trembling in apprehension of my own punishment as Aunt Clarissa gave Maddock and the now subdued boys a thorough dressing down, unaware of the smudge of smoke spiraling from her own tall hairdo.

Midway through Aunt Clarissa's tirade, a terrible roar erupted from the dining room. What began as an unearthly low moan rose to a high pitched scream. I stuffed my fingers in my ears but the wail continued. The castle shook from stone foundation to turrets. An avalanche of people poured from the dining room, and still the wail rose higher.

My arms prickled with sudden cold. Hoarfrost blossomed on the tile floor and crept up the wall and up the steps. The crystal chandelier shattered, showering shards of glass and ice on the running throng below. People clutched their throats and froze solid as I watched.

Aunt Clarissa snatched me up in a blinding flash, but I lost sight of Maddock in the confusion. Sometime later, I woke shivering on the musty, dank floor of a cavern. Before I could gather my wits, Aunt Clarissa, her clothing disheveled and her





hair flying, pushed sweet smelling incense toward me, and I drifted again into a deep and enchanted sleep.

Episode 10: Jagged Rocks and Jolting Reality

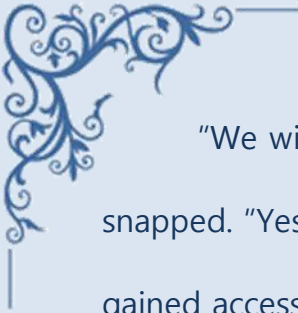
I awoke hours later to a world which bore little resemblance to the one I remembered. The steady drip, drip, drip of cold water from jagged rocks on the cavern roof roused me from a muddled dream. I lay snuggled in Aunt Clarissa's ermine cloak on the musty floor of a cave. A warm fire crackled and the smell of broth set my mouth watering. I rubbed my eyes and tried to remember what happened.

Aunt Clarissa, ever composed, handed me a steaming bowl of broth, and matter-of-factly told the tale. She was never one to treat children like children. She saw no reason to mince words.

"Zander Darkmore made the mistake of seating Avery La Croix on his right side." Aunt Clarissa pressed her lips together firmly. "Zander raised his glass to toast the marriage of his youngest daughter Lucia to the son of his oldest enemy, and Avery stabbed him in the heart. Lucia, drenched in our father's blood, must have realized Avery planned this betrayal from the start."

"But Avery and Lucia were married." I wiped broth from my chin with the back of my hand, but Aunt Clarissa handed me a napkin.





"We will observe good manners no matter our present circumstances." She snapped. "Yes, they were married and with the union, Avery and the La Croixs gained access to the Darkmore spells and plots. They especially wanted control of our collection of time crystals—something they've been after for a very long time. No doubt Avery thought Lucia's love for him kept him safe from the vengeance of the Darkmores. He was always an arrogant little prick."

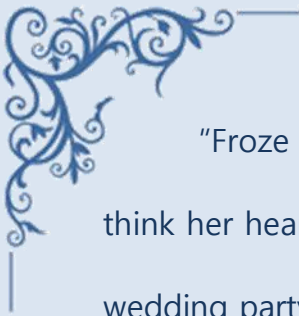
Aunt Clarissa raised the bowl of hot broth to her lips. The steam enticed color into her pale cheeks, but to my young eyes she seemed to have aged a century since I'd watched her discipline Maddock in the upper hallway of Old Castle Highmore.

"Mother says *prick* is a bad word." At the mention of my mother, tears welled in my eyes. I searched the shadows of the lonely cavern for any trace of my parents, but I already knew the truth.

"Your mother is . . . was correct. But at times, my dear, one must dispense with propriety in favor of truth. At any rate, Avery soon learned he had underestimated Lucia's affection for our father. She conjured a freezing curse—one of her specialities. No doubt Avery died instantly but I hope he had time to realize his mistake."

"Aunt Lucia killed him—her own husband?"





"Froze him where he stood, his dagger still dripping with Father's blood. I think her heart froze as well or she went mad for she turned her wrath on the entire wedding party—La Croix and Darkmores alike."

"But we escaped. Surely others managed to get out. Perhaps Mother and Father . . ."

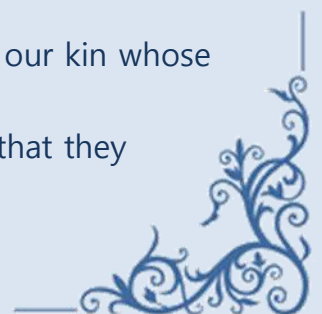
Aunt Clarissa sat her bowl aside and pulled me close, patting my hair and squeezing me tight. "It was luck I was in the upper hallway when it happened. I managed to transport you and a few others. When I returned I found stragglers, badly injured, just outside the gates but the entire castle was encased in ice. As I gathered those scarred victims together, Lucia emerged on the tallest tower. She blasted the castle into a million sparkling shards of ice—along with everyone trapped inside."

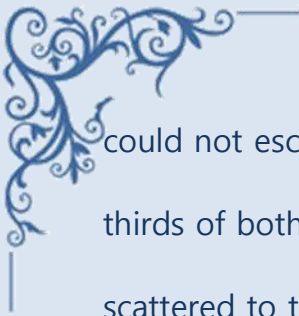
"What about Aunt Lucia?"

"We'll not call her *Aunt* Lucia anymore, Allium. My sister is gone. One cannot do what she has done without consequence. Whether she is dead or not, I do not know."

Episode 11: Kinship Will Out

In the ensuing years, Aunt Clarissa and I discovered many of our kin whose wits had not been so muddled with wine or so shocked with disbelief that they



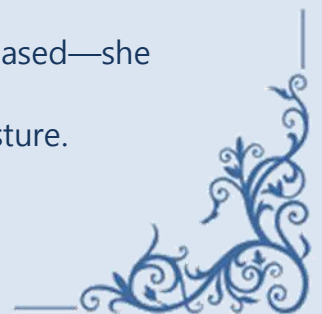


could not escape the carnage of Old Highmoor Castle. Still and all, better than two thirds of both the Darkmores and the La Croixs perished that night. The survivors scattered to the four winds, animosities forgotten in the struggle to stay alive without the strength of numbers in a hostile, witch-hating world.

Slowly but surely, Aunt Clarissa gathered the Darkmore survivors together in an organized but widely-scattered family once again. Lucia's curse spun a web of fear and mistrust. We did not meet in large numbers; we did not seek out the La Croix survivors who, like the Darkmores, gradually reconnected; we concealed our true natures; and we did not return to Highmoor Province, the scene of the massacre.

I didn't meet a La Croix in person again for over nine hundred years when Maddock approached Aunt Clarissa and me in broad daylight at a Parisian bistro. Though he'd grown from a mischievous scrawny boy to a tall, devilishly attractive man, his sparkling blue eyes, raven-black hair, and the shimmer of magic marked him as a La Croix.

I can't say exactly when I fell in love with him, or if I'd been in love with him for all those long centuries since the Time Before. At first, I didn't dare tell Aunt Clarissa, but Maddock said he wouldn't add intrigue to an already overly-dramatic family history. So he formally asked for my hand while I stood by feeling like a hunk of meat on the chopping block. Aunt Clarissa knew I would do as I pleased—she expected no less of me, in fact—but she seemed to appreciate the gesture.





Maddock and I dreamed we could salvage the old alliance and begin anew.

We returned to Highmoor Province and built New Castle Highmoor. After months of planning, we sent invitations to Darkmoors who lived in every corner of Europe and La Croixs who tended to congregate in the West. To our relief, replies were quick and abundant.

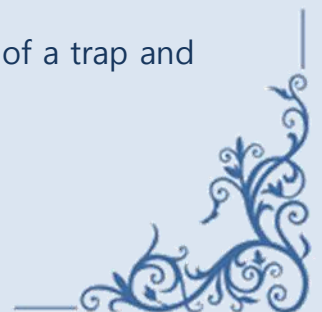
The culmination of our efforts at last came to pass. I looked across the throng of guests, listened to scattered bits of conversation. Accents and inflections, manners and gestures—familiar but now remote images in a half-forgotten dream. I recall how happy I felt and how confident in the future.

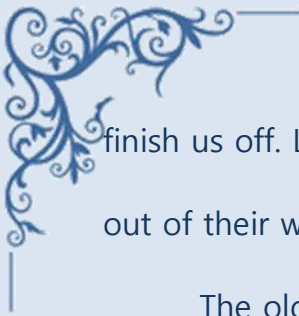
“To think,” I squeezed Maddock’s hand, “this all started because we chose to visit the same restaurant on the same day.”

Maddock, knowing my thoughts better than I, kissed my cheek. “It was fate, my dear. Even if I hadn’t recognized Aunt Clarissa, I would have known who you were. Your green eyes marked you as a Darkmore as did your imperial manner. I watched you both for the longest time, getting up my courage to speak.”

“She knew you were there. She went on point exactly like Uncle Osran’s spaniels and told me a La Croix was watching us. All I felt was a prickle on the back of my neck, but Aunt Clarissa . . . ”

He chuckled and sipped his wine. “We’ve all been looking over our shoulders for a thousand years, jumping at shadows, expecting Lucia to pop out of a trap and





finish us off. Look at them. They're putting on a brave front, but they're frightened out of their wits to be here together."

The older members of our families hid behind ceremony and manners. A flutter of oriental fans, a tilt of perfectly coifed hair, an elegant eyebrow lifted here, a polite smile there. But I felt their wariness. Some wore iron rings and bracelets—pure protection and grounding. I sniffed the scents of amaranth and asphodel, benzoin and burdock root used as protective perfumes. Many a gown sparkled with amethyst and hematite. The entire gathering glowed with protective witchery. They did not intend to be caught unawares again.

The younger guests eyed each other furtively and drank copious amounts of liquor. To them, the legend was a bed time story. Finding themselves so close to the reality of the event made them nervous.

That's all it is, I told myself.

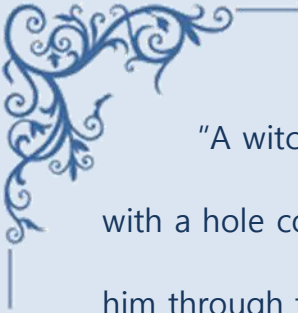
Just a residual tremor, a memory of horrible deeds—nothing more.

Episode 12: Lodestone

High above the castle, a waning moon rose in the indigo sky. The silver bell announced dinner, but Maddock and I trailed behind the chattering laughing crowd as they moved toward the grand dining room.

Maddock pressed a small smooth object into my hand. "I found it along the shore this morning. It reminded me of you."





"A witch stone." A cold, black sphere perched on my palm, perfectly round with a hole completely through the center. I held the bauble to my eye, winking at him through the chink. "But you know many witches besides me."

He wrapped my fingers around the orb. "It's a lodestone, a natural magnet. At least one element finds it absolutely irresistible. You draw me to you like this stone draws iron."

"Then this stone will ensure you always find your way to me—no matter what."

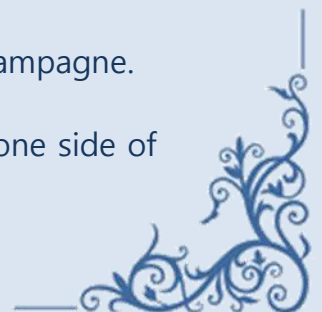
"No matter what." He kissed me chastely as befits an occasion when a number of skeptical relatives look on, but the strength of his hands, the warmth of his arms, the smell of the sea in his black hair, and the taste of his lips promised something more once dinner was over and our guests departed.

His hand in mine, we followed the crowd into the dining room.

Episode 13: Magic of the Darker Sort

Stately stewards carried in the main course on silver platters—a savory roast seasoned with rosemary and thyme. The sumptuous fragrance drew oohs and ahhs from the assemblage. Cutlery clinked on the fine china, crystal goblets glittered, and the hall filled with laughter.

Conversation bubbled throughout the room, ebullient as the champagne. Even the older relatives seemed to relax. Though the La Croixs sat on one side of





the table and the Darkmores on the other, they chatted across the steaming plates and sparkling glasses as if the two families had forgotten centuries of uneasy alliances before Lucia blasted them apart.

With a flourish, the steward refilled Maddock's glass with champagne and mine with sparkling apple juice. Maddock touched my glass with his and nodded toward the gabbling, laughing crowd.

"Am I mistaken, or does this seem to be working?"

"As Lord of the Manor, it's impossible for you to be mistaken. You are automatically correct in word and action by weight of tradition."

He nodded in the self-satisfied manner that could infuriate or amuse. "I'm going to like this."

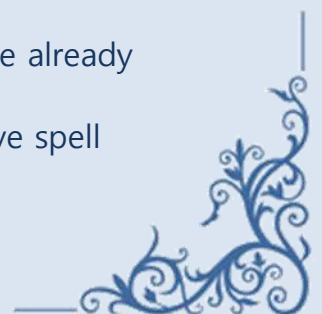
He leaned closer and I closed my eyes in anticipation of a sweet kiss that never came.

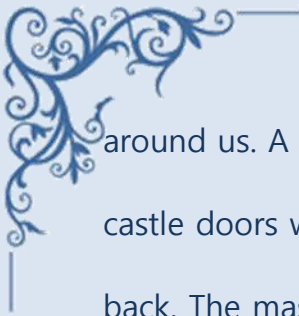
The air grew stifling hot. Conversation silenced. A buzz intensified from a mosquito's whine to an ear-splitting shriek. Goblets crashed to the floor and chairs scraped on the wooden floor as guests leapt to their feet.

Maddock was the first to realize what was happening. He kicked his chair aside and pulled me up with him. He drug me to the door, pushed me out.

"Get out of the castle? Hurry!" No time for even a kiss.

He bolted back to the dining room. Those closer to the exit were already running. I gathered as many together as I could and spread a protective spell






around us. A hot gale blasted through the foyer from the dining room, pushing the castle doors wide open. I shepherded my charges through the foyer, afraid to look back. The massive oaken staircase burst into flames. Waves of heat rose to the heights of New Castle Highmoor, tinkling the crystals of the chandelier.

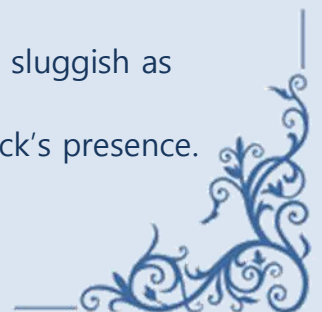
By the time we crossed the foyer and scrambled down the steps of the veranda into the courtyard, smoke billowed from the turrets and flames licked the windows. I sent them scurrying toward gates but I couldn't make myself go with them.

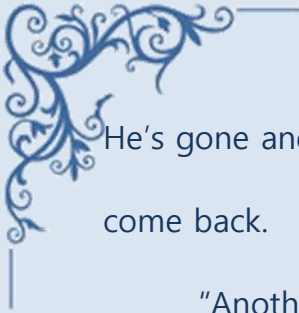
Lucia had returned to Castle Highmoor and this time she intended to finish us all. Her screech echoed from the stone walls and the fortified gates. If Maddock hadn't appeared atop the gate tower, I would have run back inside—would have tried to help.

Eight months later, I sit alone in the garden mud and wish I had.

Episode 14: Now I Wait

quelching footsteps in the muddy garden pull my thoughts from the past. Old Castle Highmoor and New Castle Highmoor meld into one blur of ice and fire. Maddock's voice cries to me from the edge of the Universe—but only in my visions. In the eight months since he disappeared, I've grown slow and sluggish as the child grows inside me, but I've neither seen, heard, nor felt Maddock's presence.





He's gone and my visions and my common sense give me no hope he will ever come back.

"Another vision?" Maybelle La Croix's raspy voice blends with the harsh calls of a dozen crows who live in the Rowan trees at the edge of the garden.

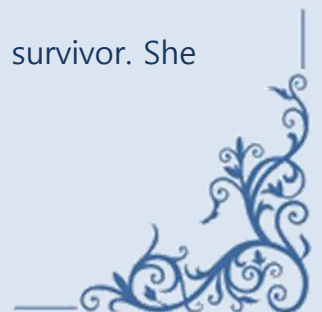
"The same."

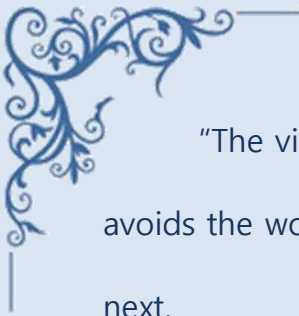
She presses her scarred lips together, a wistful gleam in her one blue eye.

Maybelle doesn't have visions anymore. Whatever magical ability she enjoyed in the Time Before lies buried. Her twisted left side and the scars on her face attest to how close she came to death the night Lucia's scourge of the Darkmore and La Croix families began.

Aunt Clarissa found her half frozen just outside the gates of Old Castle Highmore and took her to safety. A recluse since, scarred in body and mind, she did not attend my wedding at New Castle Highmoor even though Maddock begged her to do so. He'd been annoyed with her then, saying it was ridiculous to let the past destroy the future. But if she'd been in New Castle Highmoor when it disappeared, I would have had no one to turn to. She paid her debt to the Darkmores by keeping me safe since. As far as we know, we two are the only ones left. The few who fled with me either turned back or fled to the ends of the earth. The entire Darkmore and La Croix families are gone.

A solid kick jars my internal organs and reminds me of the third survivor. She kicks like a Spanish mule and will not be ignored.





"The visions are coming faster now. That must mean something." Maybelle avoids the worst of the mud by hopping from one tussock of brittle grass to the next.

"It means I'm closer to madness, I think."

"It may." She helps me rise, tugging my rumpled skirt and blouse snugly over my bulging belly. "No use feeling sorry for yourself. The equinox is nearly here. Before long, birds will be singing and the tomatoes will be ready to pick. Just wait and see."

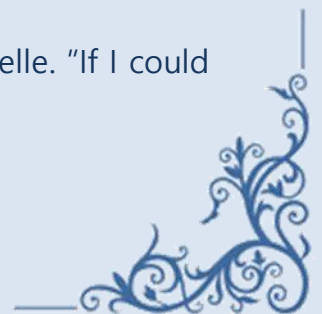
I'm trapped in limbo—waiting for the baby, waiting for Maddock, waiting for some nameless thing to right a skewed world.

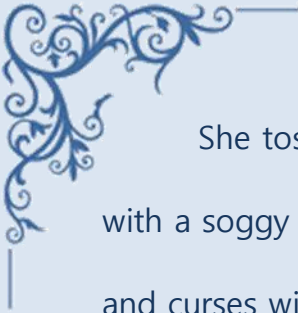
"I hope so, Maybelle. I hope so." I trudge behind her, not bothering to avoid the mud.

Episode 15: Old Crows and Offerings

A cloud of crows chatter in the branches of the rowan trees. I understand only a few of the names they call us, but that's enough. Maddock was . . . is . . . an expert in bird languages. Though he tried to teach me, I spent most of our lessons watching the sun on his hair and the way his eyes change from ice blue to indigo.

"I see why they call a group of crows a murder," mutters Maybelle. "If I could get my hands on them, I'd wring their necks."





She tosses a clump of mud at the impudent birds. The projectile falls to earth with a soggy splash, stirring up the flock. They wheel and kite, screaming epithets and curses with renewed vigor.

One particularly large and particularly vocal crow dives at Mayebelle, raking her head with sharp talons. Another tries the same with me, but I send a spark of green magic into his feathers. Maddock's old fire spell smolders in the soft down beneath the coarse plumage. The crow retreats hurling curses at me from the safety of the thick fir trees.

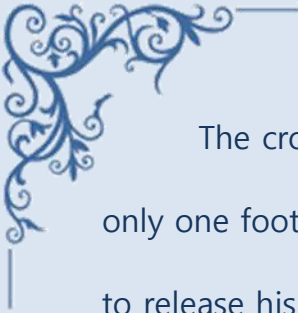
"Let's get inside the croft before they come back." Mayebelle fingers the scratch on her head, limping toward the door. "The devil's in all animals today. Even Pyewacket refused to eat a perfectly good bit of baked chicken. He snaps with static every time I touch him."

Pyewacket the black cat watches us from the windowsill. His amber eyes focus on something behind me. In a fluid motion, he rises on his toes. White teeth flash and black fur fuzzes to spiky heights.

A flutter of feathers near my ear and sharp claws on my shoulder bring me up short. A crow--not the pushy young one who attacked Mayebelle--but an old crow with notched wings and rheumy eyes perches on my shoulder.

"Stand still, Allium," cries Mayebelle. "I'll fetch the besom and make him regret the day he visited our garden." She disappears inside the croft.





The crow's claws bite into the meaty part of my arm, but he's standing on only one foot. He clutches something in the other. I hold out my hand, coaxing him to release his burden. He winks a bright bird eye and drops an object onto my open palm.

"I bring you this in remembrance of one who saved my nest many years ago." The bird speaks slowly, making sure I understand. "A La Croix he was. You have his magic."

Before Mayebelle returns with the broom, he flaps his moldering wings and soars out of sight.

I squeeze my fingers around the crow's gift. I don't have to look at it to know what I hold.

On the night Lucia and Maddock disappeared, I'd put it on the table in front of me. Through that last dinner, I enjoyed the dark mystery of the witch stone, felt the subtle pull of its magnetic aura.

When Lucia appeared, Maddock hurried me out of the castle before I had time to grab it. That's the last I saw of it.

Until now.

Episode 16: Pilgrimage





"Allium, you can't go." Mayebelle flattens herself against the door as if she means to stop me with bodily force.

"That stone was inside the castle, Mayebelle—*inside*." I jam a blanket into my worn duffle bag along with underwear and woolen socks.

"It's such a long way, and you won't be able to travel quickly. Not in your condition."

"I can be in Highmoor Valley in four days." I pick up a sweater and push it into the bag.

"We don't know what might be out there. Beyond the boundary." Mayebelle casts a fear-filled eye out the window. "Maddock would come here—if he could."

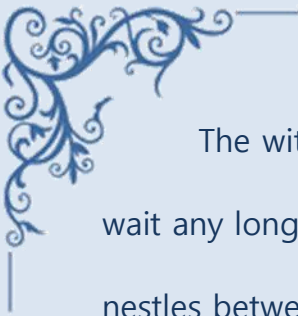
"He may be hurt. He may need help."

"And just what are a cripple and a pregnant woman going to do about that?"

After Mayebelle found me babbling on the road, we lingered in Highmoor Valley for weeks—hoping the castle would pop into existence again. At last, Mayebelle convinced me to return with her to her home. I had just enough sense left to lay a protective boundary just beyond the fringe of trees encircling her plot of land. Neither of us has ventured beyond it since.

I always intended to go back. As little Petunia, Lavender, or Felicity grew, I abandoned the idea of returning until she was born.





The witch stone simmers in my hand, warm and pulsing with energy. I can't wait any longer. I string it with a jute cord and slip it over my head. The stone nestles between my breasts.

"I'm going, Mayebelle. You don't have to come. I know how hard it is for you to go . . . outside. I understand." I settle the stiff woolen poncho over my shoulders and hoist the duffel bag.

"What if the baby comes while you're on the road?"

"I'll be back before then." I waddle out the door, muffling the raw spring wind with a scarf around my face. Little Abbie or Betty or Celeste taps softly beneath my rib cage—encouragement, I think.

The sun is already westering, but I have to get started. Before I reach the gate, Mayebelle's hoarse voice calls from the door of her cozy croft.

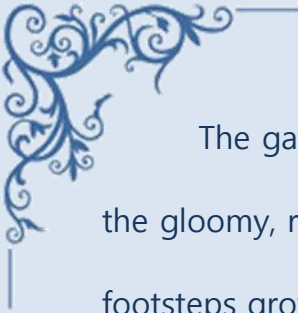
"Alright, you stubborn gobshite. You can't go alone. Wait while I pack. You've run off without provisions and I'll have to leave food for Pyewacket."

To my over excited senses, Mayebelle wastes precious time. She moves as slowly as sap while I dance with impatience.

"I'm not waiting. You can catch up."

The garden gate, damp and swollen, refuses to open. I yank it with both hands, suddenly desperate to escape this safe, stagnant place. Why did I delay? What if I'm already too late?





The gate opens with a creak of wet wood and I do my best to hurry along the gloomy, rain-drenched road. The gate latch snaps behind me and padding footsteps grow louder.

Mayebelle catches up to me easily, despite her twisted, ice-burned legs. She limps to my side and puts a supporting hand under my arm. "At least I won't slow you down. You can't go any faster than I can."

I'm glad the scarf hides my face. I would hate her to see how happy I am she's with me—how relieved I won't be alone when I look down on Highmoor Valley once again.

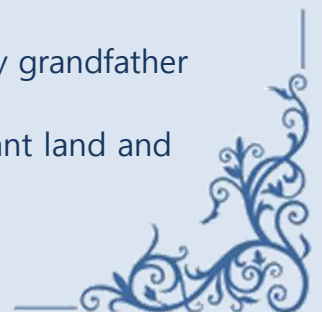
A black crow rides the cold wind beneath the lowering clouds. His harsh cry, distant but clear, falls with the mist of rain.

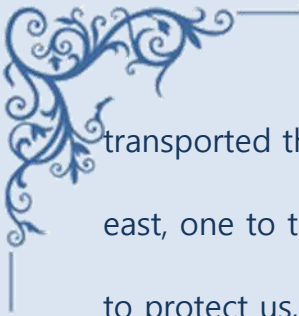
"Hurry," he calls. "Time is changing."

Episode 17: Quarried Stones

Three soggy days later, Mayebelle and I rest in the shadow of the monolith marking the entrance to Highmoor province, the ancestral home of the Darkmore and La Croix families.

Mayebelle traces the carvings with a gnarled, scarred finger. "My grandfather quarried these stones himself, tore them from the mountains in a distant land and





transported them by the light of a Samhain moon. One to the north, one to the east, one to the south, and this one on the western boundary. They were supposed to protect us, these stones.”

“We can’t rely on them and we can’t get lost in what-if’s.” I munch a morsel of oatmeal scone.

Mayebelle made certain we would have provisions for the journey, but her sense of variety is sadly lacking. If I never taste an oatmeal scone or peanut trail mix again, I will die happy. Even little Zinnia or Lulubelle or Alyssum grows weary of the bland diet. She punches out her displeasure in rhythmic taps.

“They still have magic in them.” Mayebelle presses her face against the cold, silent stones. “I know they do.”

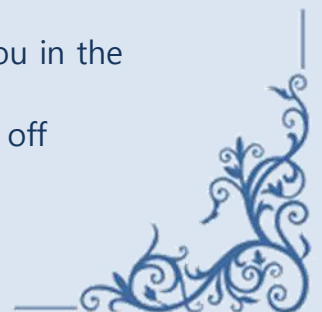
“Well, now would be a nice time for them to lend a hand.”

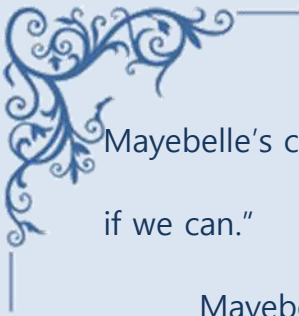
“Time isn’t ours to command. Even our span of life, long though it may be in the eyes of others, is no more than a grain of sand to the Universe.”

“I’m not in the mood for philosophy, Mayebelle. The only time I’m interested in is the time it will take to reach Highmoor valley. Another day’s journey at least.” I flop like a beached whale, trying to regain my feet. Mayebelle grunts with effort as she helps me rise.

“Are you feeling well? Your face is red.”

“Your face would be red too if you had a little demon kicking you in the stomach from dawn till dusk.” A sharp pain catches my breath. I shake off





Mayebelle's concern. "I'm fine. Come on. I want to look down in the valley by sunset if we can."

Mayebelle retrieves my walking stick from the ground for I have long since stopped even trying to bend over for such things.

The way ahead is rocky and steep. An hour later, we pause at the cleft of a rocky hill, resting from the climb. I mop sweat from my neck and rub the knotted bundle inside my belly. Janie or Nancy or Paula curls in a tight ball distorting my shape into a lopsided mass. A stiff, raw wind carries the scent of wet dirt and leaf mold from the forest and an owl hoots far away.

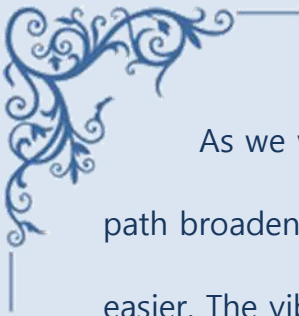
In the distance, the Western Monolith etches a dark hole against the evening sky. Is it fancy or a trick of the light? The spiral carvings on the stone undulate and pulse with green magic.

The witch stone, suspended on a cord around my neck, vibrates in answer. Mayebelle is right. Magic lingers in the cold hearts of the ancient stones.

Episode 18: Return to Highmoor Valley

The rocky trail ascends higher and higher. I gasp with each step and grit my teeth against a gnawing pain in my side. Behind us, the setting sun casts long shadows across the moor for which the province gets its name.





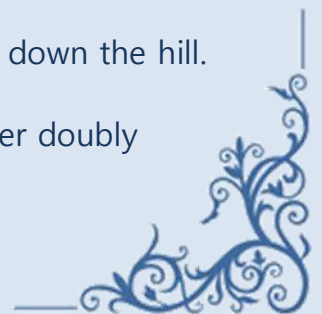
As we walk, the bubble and splash of water on stones grows louder and the path broadens. Evening deepens, but patches of repaired pavement make walking easier. The vibrant waters of the Whispering River cascade beside the road, increased by the confluence of smaller tributaries until it is a broad, strong stream. The last rise is before us. On the other side lies Highmoor Valley where New Highmoor Castle should stand on the ruins of the old one.

Sheltered by a ring of mountains, this tranquil spot in a secluded region was ever the safe haven for the magical and often contentious Darkmores and La Croixs. Though we ventured outside into the world of mortals, Highmoor remained a steady and abiding refuge. When Lucia Darkmore and Avery La Croix married, the families anticipated a generation of peace but Lucia smashed those hopes with murder and malice and madness. No one lives here now.

Maddock and I dreamed we could restore trust between our families. In a way, we did. I lean on Mayebelle La Croix's arm. She and I are the only ones left. But the witch stone bounces against my chest and I can't abandon hope just yet. My belly cramps, insistent and sharp. My muscles scream for respite after days of scrambling over the scrubby wasteland.

"We should stop," Mayebelle puffs the words on breathless gasps. "We can go down into the valley tomorrow after a good meal and a night's rest."

"Come on. It's just over the next rise beyond the forest." I totter down the hill. Mayebelle limps behind me. The last time she ventured this far from her doubly





secured croft, she witnessed fire and devastation and felt Lucia's dark magic once more.

"Have I ever thanked you properly? You saved my life."

"We saved each other that night," she catches up despite her growing fear. "I would have gone mad if I hadn't found you."

"And I would have sat beside the river waiting for Maddock to come back until I died."

"Allium," she stops, pulling me around to face her. "Though we both hope the witch stone is a sign, we must be prepared in case . . ."

"It is a sign. Otherwise, I can't make sense of this. Otherwise, I can't make sense of anything." I push forward, hurrying along the now broad and graveled path as it ducks into the forest. I tell myself I am ready for whatever I see but little Samantha or Sabrina or Elspeth begs to differ with a solid thump. My belly contorts, and I double over, hands on knees.

The last white wisps of cloud drift to the north leaving the sky ice blue. A current of cold night air winds around my ankles. Clutching each other for support, Mayebelle and I step from the forested fringe on the ridge. For the first time in eight months, I look down the graveled path beside the clear stream to the meadow where Maddock and I built New Castle Highmoor.

