

A Cold Spring

By Sorchia DuBois





Episode 1: *A Cherry Tomato*

A cherry tomato.

That's what I want.

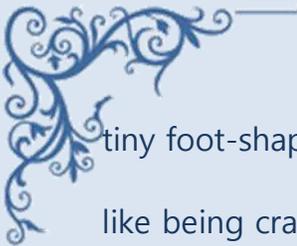
I've craved it for the entire cold, dark winter. The subtle pop as the marble-sized, red globe separates from the calyx. The delectable crunch between the teeth and the sweet explosion of tangy, blood-warm juice. A fresh-picked, sun-warmed, red, ripe cherry tomato.

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.

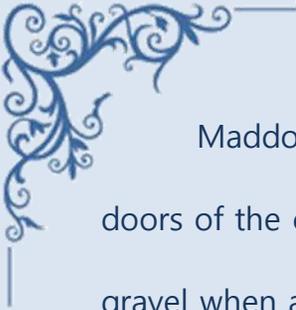
A chilly wind fingers the back of my neck. The fine hair on my arms prickles and a buzz in my head drowns out the cawing crows. Between one breath and the next, a vision rises from the garden mud. Beyond my control, these visions have visited me often in recent months-- horrifying replays of devastation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

The phantasm twists it's 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.

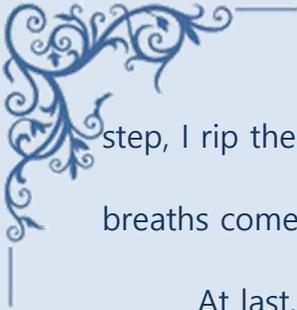
"Run, Allium. I'll find you. I'll find you both."

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

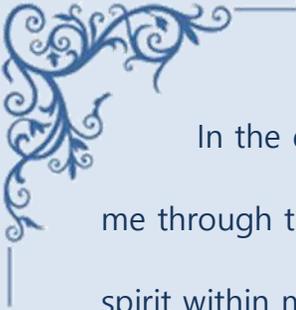
Lucia's enchantment coils into the form of a snake, its head poised to strike. Above me, the creature rises. It's awful shadow blots out the moon, blots out the stars, consumes my last fragment of hope.

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.

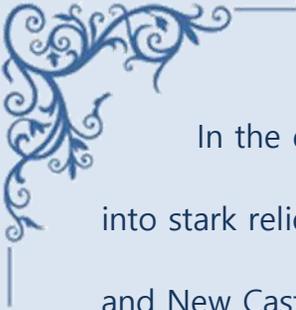
I’m too late.

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





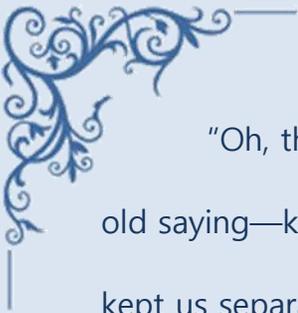
Fashionably late, Aunt Clarissa, the matriarch of my family, stepped regally from an elegant silver and gray coach drawn by four matched gray mares. Her burgundy brocade gown emphasized the gleaming green eyes and ivory skin for which we Darkmores are known. An onyx and diamond comb adorned her once 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."

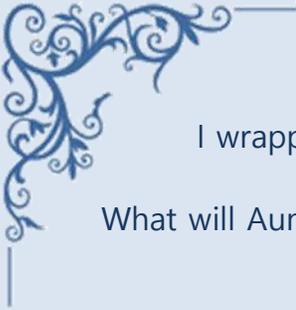
Aunt Clarissa cocked an elegant and knowing eyebrow at us as she swept into the drawing room where raven-tressed Aurora La Croix sipped blood-red wine amidst an admiring throng of La Croix cousins.

"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."





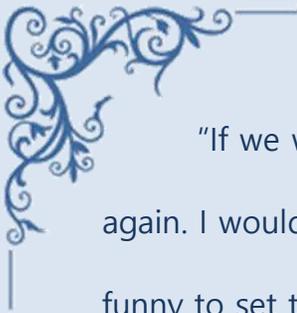
I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled his face to mine. "Scandalous. What will Aunt Clarissa say?"

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."

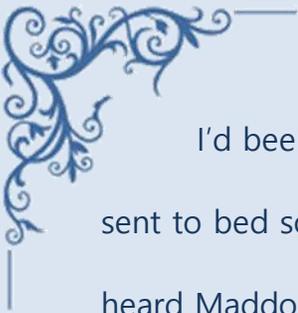
"Lucky for you Lucia stole the spotlight, or Aunt Clarissa would have thought up a proper punishment."

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.





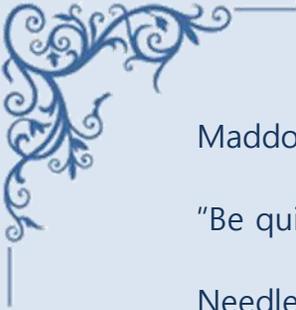
I'd been awake, snuggled with Elderberry, my stuffed dragon. I resented being sent to bed so early. Noise from the party below rose to the bedroom. When I heard Maddock and several of the older boys creeping through the upper hallway, I supposed they were up to something interesting. Leaving Elderberry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

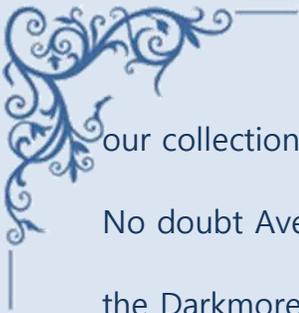
Aunt Clarissa, ever composed, handed me a steaming bowl of broth, and matter-of-factly told the tale. She was never one to treat children like children. She saw no reason to mince words.

"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 Croixs 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 Darkmores 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.

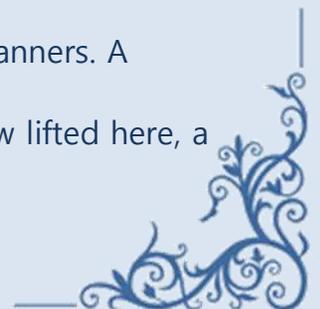
“To think,” I squeezed Maddock’s hand, “this all started because we chose to visit the same restaurant on the same day.”

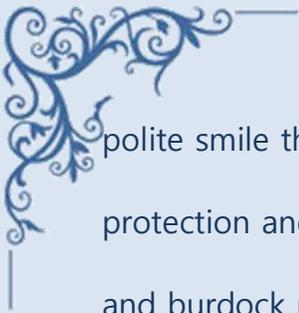
Maddock, knowing my thoughts better than I, kissed my cheek. “It was fate, my dear. Even if I hadn’t recognized Aunt Clarissa, I would have known who you were. Your green eyes marked you as a Darkmore as did your imperial manner. I watched you both for the longest time, getting up my courage to speak.”

“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.

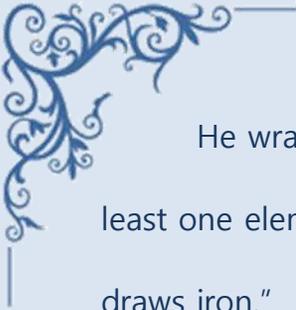
Episode 12: Lodestone

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

tately 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."

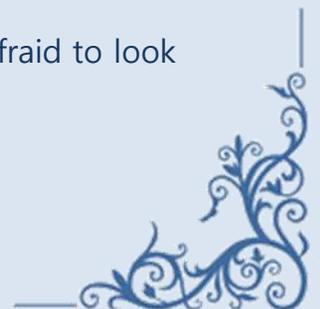
He leaned closer and I closed my eyes in anticipation of a sweet kiss that never came.

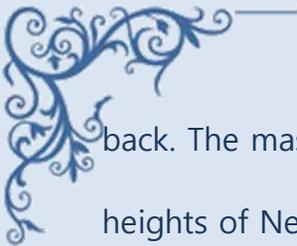
The air grew stifling hot. Conversation silenced. A buzz intensified from a mosquito's whine to an ear-splitting shriek. Goblets crashed to the floor and chairs scraped on the wooden floor as guests leapt to their feet.

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.

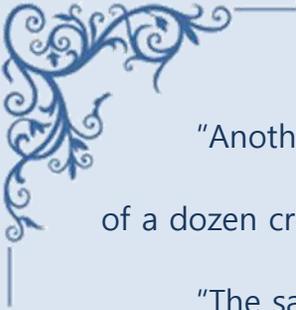
Lucia had returned to Castle Highmoor and this time she intended to finish us all. Her screech echoed from the stone walls and the fortified gates. If Maddock hadn't appeared atop the gate tower, I would have run back inside—would have tried to help.

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."

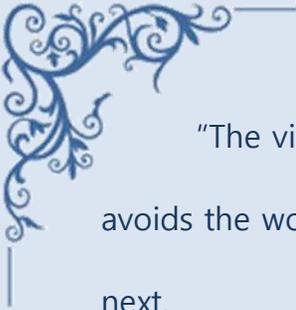
She presses her scarred lips together, a wistful gleam in her one blue eye.

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."

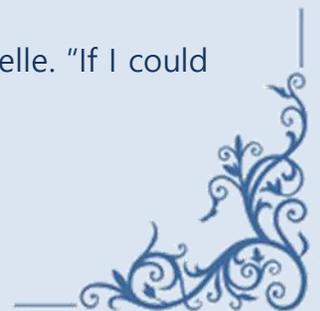
I'm trapped in limbo—waiting for the baby, waiting for Maddock, waiting for some nameless thing to right a skewed world.

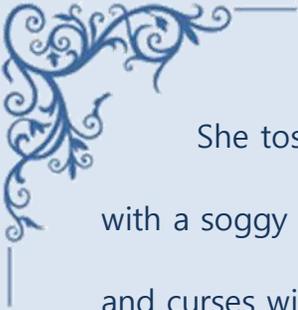
"I hope so, Maybelle. I hope so." I trudge behind her, not bothering to avoid the mud.

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.

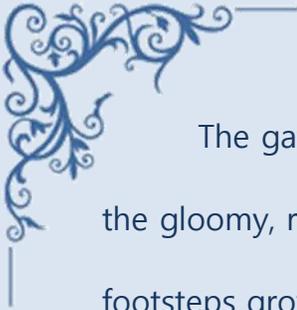
"Alright, you stubborn gobshite. You can't go alone. Wait while I pack. You've run off without provisions and I'll have to leave food for Pyewacket."

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.

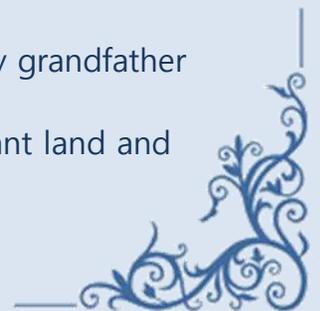
A black crow rides the cold wind beneath the lowering clouds. His harsh cry, distant but clear, falls with the mist of rain.

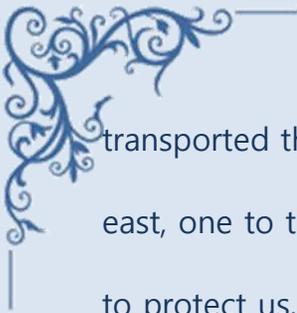
"Hurry," he calls. "Time is changing."

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.”

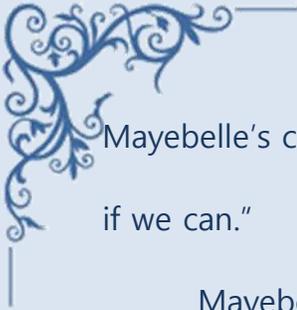
“Time isn’t ours to command. Even our span of life, long though it may be in the eyes of others, is no more than a grain of sand to the Universe.”

“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.

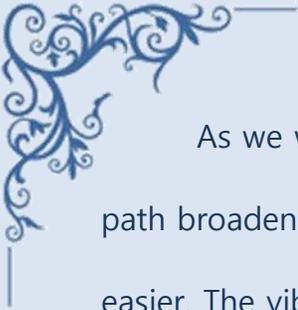
In the distance, the Western Monolith etches a dark hole against the evening sky. Is it fancy or a trick of the light? The spiral carvings on the stone undulate and pulse with green magic.

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.





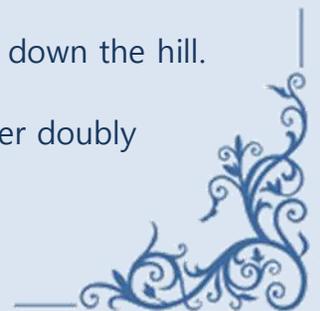
As we walk, the bubble and splash of water on stones grows louder and the path broadens. Evening deepens, but patches of repaired pavement make walking easier. The vibrant waters of the Whispering River cascade beside the road, increased by the confluence of smaller tributaries until it is a broad, strong 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.

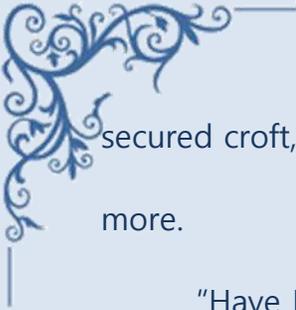
Sheltered by a ring of mountains, this tranquil spot in a secluded region was ever the safe haven for the magical and often contentious Darkmores and La Croixs. Though we ventured outside into the world of mortals, Highmoor remained a steady and abiding refuge. When Lucia Darkmore and Avery La Croix 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.





Episode 20: Timeless

"Why is this taking so long? Is this normal?"

Whatever I expected childbirth would be like, this long night of waiting is not it. At first there was no pain—even little Circe or Penelope or Athena stopped moving. Then the contractions began. Hours later, I understand why they call it *labor*.

"It's normal for a La Croix baby. I delivered hundreds of those in the Time Before. I can't say what ridiculous habits Darkmore mothers may have." Mayebelle, always practical and brusque, presses her lips in a thin line. Her practiced hands mold my belly.

A fresh pain turns my sharp reply into a whimper. "It's getting worse."

"The pains are simply coming faster. Closer to the end. Don't push yet."

"What do you mean 'don't push?' How am I supposed to not push?" I close my eyes and try to absorb the pain.

"Wait until dawn if you can. I can't see what I'm doing by firelight."

"That isn't entirely in my control, Mayebelle." I lean back on the pallet of bundled clothes and leaves, gasping as the contraction tightens my stomach into a hard ball.





Perfectly balanced, the full moon touches the western horizon as the first rays of the sun gleam behind the mountains. Today is the spring equinox. Sun and Moon and Earth in symmetry.

"I knew this would happen," says Mayebelle for the one thousandth time. "I told you this child wouldn't wait."

"She'll be born in Highmoor Valley. Just as I was. Just as Maddock was," I say through clenched teeth. "If she's going to be the last Darkmore and La Croix child, let her at least say she began her life here."

"Hmmp." Mayebelle snorts like a horse. "And look where such a boast got the rest of us. Bearing a child here tempts the dark magic that curses this valley. No good will come of it."

Mayebelle mops my forehead with a damp cloth, but I push away her hand. Light grows, fingering the clouds in the eastern sky, flowing into the valley on the bubbling river foam. Forest birds greet the dawn with chatters and chirps. With a rustle of black wings and a chorus of harsh caws, a flock of crows whirl from the leafy forest roof.

I sit up, close my eyes, and concentrate on relaxing my belly. She may be as annoying as a boil but Mayebelle is also a midwife of great renown. I know I should heed her advice.

When the pain ebbs away, I take in a deep breath and open my eyes. Mayebelle, mouth gaping, points a scarred finger at the lodestone which hangs





suspended from a cord around my neck. My movements have dislodged it from its resting place between my breasts. Instead of hanging like a stone should, it sways with increasing force. It stretches the cord straight toward Highmoor Valley.

The clasp snaps and the stone flies away, following the crows across the valley.

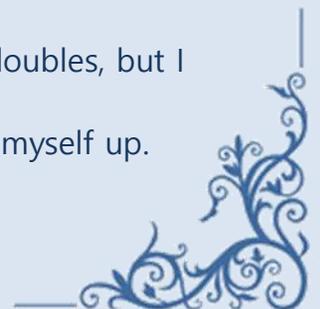
"What in the name of . . ." My voice trails to nothing. The wayward witch stone is forgotten. Even pain, for a moment, becomes a secondary concern.

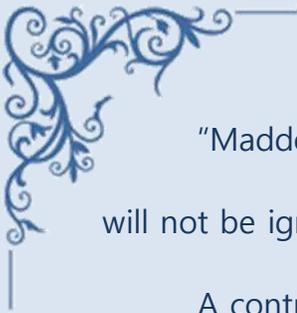
The lodestone flies straight and true into the heart of a tornadic spiral of fog in the very center of Highmoor Valley. I blink tears and sweat from my eyes, straining to make sense of the shadow within the spiral. Without so much as a whisper, a solid structure emerges from the swirl of fog.

The turrets still ablaze, smoke pouring from the windows, New Castle Highmoor materializes on the valley's floor. The gates fly open and running forms emerge. They scatter toward the safety of the cold, clear waters of the Whispering River, but one tall figure strides toward us.

Episode 21: Unexpected

Discarding the light blanket Mayebelle has wrapped around me, I scabble in the spring-damp mold of the forest floor. Pain in my midsection redoubles, but I crawl to the edge of the road and use a handy rowan sapling to hoist myself up.





"Maddock!" I would have run to him, but little Priscilla or Madeleine or Jane will not be ignored.

A contraction tightens like a band of iron across my stomach. The figure on the path is running now. Running toward us. My womb convulses, and I'm sure I'm about to die. Mayebelle pulls me back to the warmth of the makeshift pallet of leaves and spare clothes and pushes me on my back.

"It's real, isn't it, Mayebelle?" I can't see past her solid form and a nagging fear whispers to me, telling me the castle and Maddock are wishful visions only. "It has to be real this time."

Mayebelle glances over her shoulder. When she turns toward me, her face is in shadow. "It's real, my dear, but what it means I cannot guess."

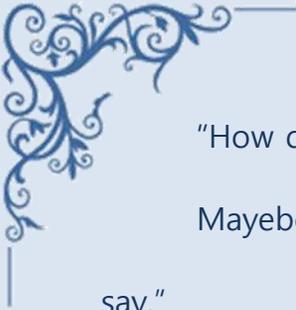
Through insistent pain, I vaguely feel his steps vibrate through the rocky ground, vaguely hear his voice.

"What's wrong? Mayebelle, what's wrong with her?" His voice sounds so real but I keep my eyes closed tight, convinced he will dissolve into nothing if I open them.

"She's having a child, you fool." Mayebelle hikes my skirt and splays my legs apart, peering at my groin. "Right now, by the look of it."

A warm hand grasps mine. Solid arms support me. My eyes spring open with his touch. I trace the line of his jaw, the curve of his lips. A quizzical expression on his face, he snaps his gaze from Mayebelle to me.





"How did this happen?"

Mayebelle glares at him with her one good eye. "What an idiotic thing to say."

She returns to her perusal of my privates and shifts my pelvis into a different configuration. Aching, gnawing pain in my abdomen redoubles and the pressure on my nether regions becomes nearly unbearable. I squeeze Maddock's hand.

"Where have you been? Where is Lucia?" I gasp out the questions. The intervals between contractions diminish to nothing. "She mustn't get little Ruth or Mary or Esther."

His La Croix eyes flash. "That will not happen."

A contraction draws me upright, but my cries are more of frustration than pain.

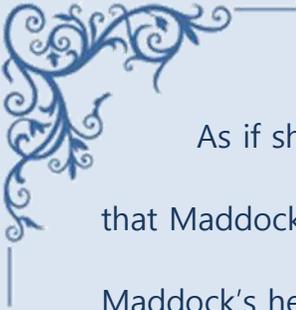
"No time for news, dear. This baby is most insistent to be born." Maybelle pats the inside of my leg encouragingly. "A few good pushes and we're finished."

She snaps at Maddock. "Stop gaping like an overripe fish. Sit behind her, brace her back."

"We need to join the others. Our strength is in numbers." Maddock sits behind me, stretching his legs on either side, wrapping warm arms around me. "How long is this going to take?"

"Don't be an idiot. Do as you're told." Mayebelle straightens the blanket beneath my hips and lays a steady hand on my tummy. "Push, dear."





As if she has to tell me. Birth is on automatic pilot at this point. All I know is that Maddock's arms support me, Maddock's lips whisper encouragement, Maddock's heart beats against my back.

One—

Two—

Three grinding pushes and the baby slips into Mayebelle's waiting hands. Mayebelle swaddles the wriggling child with a soft cotton towel and lays her on my chest.

Maddock and I look at her for the first time. Little arms and legs stretch, free at last. A sheaf of hair, tawny and wet, lies plastered on her oval crown. She sneezes, expelling the last of the amniotic fluid. Tiny fingers curl around Maddock's thumb and milky blue eyes, strangely alert for such a tiny child, blink in her damp, red face. I lean back in Maddock's arms, spent but elated.

"I've only been gone a few minutes, Allium," he whispers. "Just a few short minutes."

Episode 22: A Vial of Time

Mayebelle finishes her midwife duties with precision and skill. A few minutes later, I am warm and dry and contented though I can barely raise my hand





above the coverlet. The baby emits a series of shrieks, protesting the cold air and the outrage of being pulled from one world to another.

"What a lot of noise and bother for such a little thing." Maddock holds the baby in both arms, careful to support her head, careful to keep the blanket snug around her. Her cries soften as he gently rocks her to and fro.

"Impressive how well you do that right out of the gate." I am entirely exhausted and afraid to move for fear my muscles will refuse even the slightest request.

"I've held babies before." He plants a soft kiss on our child's forehead. "Never one as beautiful as this one, of course."

"Where have you been, Maddock?"

Stirred from his reverie, he scans the valley, the forest, the sky. He hands the baby to Mayebelle. "We must be on our way back to the others. No one should be alone. Can you walk?"

As it turns out, I can't. The long journey, not to mention eight months of fear and longing have taken their toll. "I'm afraid I can't even stand up."

"Never mind, then." Maddock lifts me into his arms. My head fits perfectly into the spot just below his collar bone and I decide this is infinitely preferable to walking.





"Don't bother gathering these things, Mayebelle. We've already lingered too long on our own." Maddock strides surely down the slope. Mayebelle brings up the rear with the baby and our hastily gathered kit.

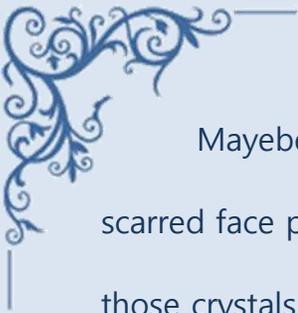
The sun, well above the mountains by now, beams between still-bare branches of oak and sycamore but beneath the pines dappled shadows play across our path. A fresh cool breeze ruffles my hair. Not a cloud darkens the cobalt blue sky, but a dark foreboding gnaws.

"If you don't tell me what happened, I'm going to explode. Where have you been? Where is Lucia?" A delicious odor wafts up the hill. I lift my head from its resting place on Maddock's chest. A rumble in my stomach reminds me I haven't eaten anything in uncounted hours. "And what is that delectable smell?"

Spirals of smoke rise from the ruined castle in the center of Highmoor Valley. Smaller fires, kindled by Darkmore and La Croix wedding guests, burn along the riverbank. The smell of food lifts on the spring breeze along with the murmur of conversation and the occasional shrill laugh. Roast beef. I definitely smell roast beef. After days of eating nothing but oatmeal scones, my mouth waters and my stomach gurgles.

"Never let attempted murder and a burned castle ruin a good party. That's the La Croix motto." Maddock slows his pace a fraction. "My story is brief. I used a time crystal."





Mayebelle walks close behind us. I peek at her over Maddock's shoulder. Her scarred face pales and she gasps at Maddock's revelation. "No one understands how those crystals work. They are infinitely more dangerous than Lucia."

Maddock grunts in agreement. "When Lucia set the castle alight, I didn't know what else to do. No time to measure, you see, to say the proper words. Allium pulled all that energy for her bloody death spell and I had to be quick before she scoured the entire valley."

"I was cornered. I thought you were dead."

"Do all Darkmores have such a penchant for drama?" He squeezes me fondly.

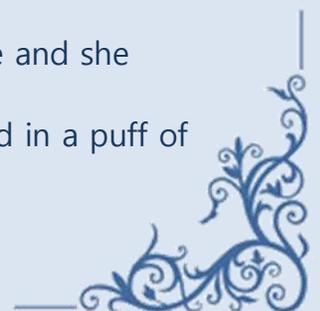
"How did you get your grimy La Croix paws on the Darkmore's treasured time crystals?" My wits circle like a wayward flock of pigeons.

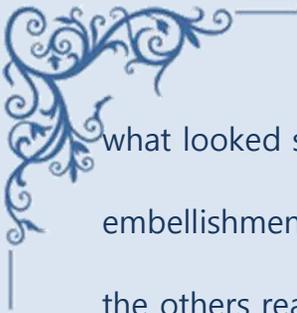
"I wonder the same thing." Mayebelle limps as quickly as she can. Maddock slows so she can walk beside us. "The Darkmores and the La Croixs have fought wars over those tiny crystals."

"Aunt Clarissa gave me a vial of the stuff when we announced our marriage. She said if I was foolish enough to marry a Darkmore, I'd better share the responsibility of guarding the past and the future. She takes it quite seriously."

"And you wondered if she likes you." I snuggle against his chest.

"To those of us in the castle, only a few minutes passed. The time crystal shimmered above the table like a star. Lucia knew what it was at once and she skewered me with the nastiest scowl you've ever seen. She disappeared in a puff of





what looked suspiciously like sulphuric smoke. You Darkmores do love your little embellishments. Time warped around us. The crystal dissolved in a millisecond. Once the others realized what had happened, they streamed out the doors. The castle was lost, but they saved what they could."

"So Lucia is on the loose after all. I'd hoped . . ."

"Never fear. It seems each and every one of our refined and sophisticated guests came to our wedding armed to the teeth. You've never seen the like of such handily draw spells. Such conveniently available amulets and charms. Such accessible hexes and potions. It's a miracle no one was vaporized accidentally."

"What did you expect?" Maybelle sniffs. "You two were the only ones who believed in peace and harmony."

"I didn't know how far into the future we'd been flung. I can't tell you how relieved I was when I heard you cry out." He tightens his arms around me. "I've told you mine, now tell me yours."

The terror of the night Maddock disappeared, the long months of hopeless waiting as our baby grew inside, the cold forbidding winter, and the despair I felt when I looked down on this valley only last night fade with the morning mist.

"It doesn't bear repeating." A little tremble along my spine is all that remains. "Someone is cooking roast beef. I can smell it."

I've dreamt of returning to this valley many times in the past months—imagined a thousand ways the reunion might go. War and death and fear seemed





likely results of Lucia's most recent atrocity. It becomes clear as we approach the group of Darkmores and La Croixs none of my imaginings came close to reality.

Episode 23: Witches, Witches Everywhere

lder relatives, slightly singed but maintaining an air of refinement, rest on tussocks near the river, enjoying quiet conversation. Their breaths puff into white vapor in the cool morning air. All in all, the scene is one of a pleasant outdoor celebration in full swing despite the occasional crash from the burning castle. The one common trait all witches share—no matter their politics—is adaptability.

Even the musicians, looking a bit the worse for wear, have struck up a lively tune. Younger cousins dance and cavort on the fresh grass. The remains of New Castle Highmoor smolder in the background. A Darkmore cousin—one of the Dutch Darkmores, I believe—hands me a goblet of wine.

"What a bash!" He shouts, green eyes blazing, blond hair positively standing on end. He's more than a little buzzed despite the early hour. Then I remember that for him, it is still the crux of the evening. "They'll never believe it when I tell them about it at home. So happy to be here for the party of the millennia."

He chucks Maddock's shoulder, nearly pushing the two of us into a nearby shrub, and scurries away. He merges with a group of like-minded scamps. They





move closer to the castle to practice their incantations by knocking down the few remaining walls.

"Good Lord," Maddock groans. "I shudder to think what we'll have to do for our anniversary party to top this."

"More pressing problems approach," murmurs Mayebelle, nodding toward two figures making steady progress in our direction.

Aunt Clarissa and Aurora La Croix exchange brief pleasantries with those in their path, but their course is inexorably and unerringly toward us.

Maddock groans again. "If those two women have joined forces, we can expect the Apocalypse to follow in short order."

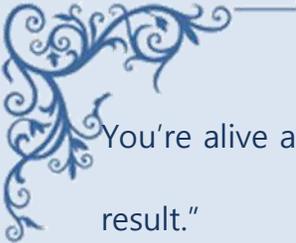
"They'll have words to say about the time crystal you used." Mayebelle winks her good eye knowingly.

"And none of those words will be pleasant, I wager." He watches the two matriarchs with a tight jaw.

"You better put me down. You may need to use me as a human shield." I feel my strength returning though I can't help but think a large serving of that roast beef might be in order.

He sets me gently on my own two feet, but supports me with a strong arm. He squares his shoulders. Dark eyebrows knit over glacial blue eyes in the same defiant expression I remember from a thousand years ago when Aunt Clarissa caught him practicing fire magic without permission. "I don't care what they say.





You're alive and that is all that matters. I wouldn't alter a thing as long as this is the result."

"Their barks are worse than their bites," Mayebelle says, moving closer in a show of solidarity. "Never fear."

Mayebelle adjusts the blanket around the baby, but her face twists into a configuration I've seldom witnessed in the past eight months. She's smiling.

Without so much as a "Nice to see you, Allium" Aunt Clarissa, her gown stained and her hair less than perfect, levels a green-eyed glower at Maddock.

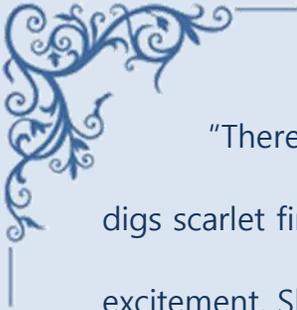
"Did I or did I not—in most serious terms—advise caution regarding those time crystals? It's a miracle you didn't blast us all centuries into the future."

Aurora La Croix's purple velvet gown is dusted with ash. She folds Mayebelle in a bear-like embrace. "Mayebelle, darling. It's been too long."

Before Aunt Clarissa can continue, Aurora pats Maddock's arm, winking a bright blue eye. "You gave us a start, for sure and certain, but all's well now. Clarissa, you mustn't blame him too much. Look what he's brought us."

Mayebelle strategically displays the baby, now wide awake and staring. Clearly, Aunt Clarissa is not finished with Maddock, but the glitter in her eyes softens. She caresses the baby's face with a pale finger. "I admit the distraction probably saved lives. Not one casualty despite Lucia's best efforts. What's done is done."





"There's no time to properly welcome you into the family, Allium." Aurora digs scarlet fingernails into my arm, her delicately plucked eyebrows arched with excitement. She cocks her head, listening to the air. "Can't you feel it?"

A thousand witches draw a collective breath. A fizz, a pop, a subtle shift in the ether—time shifts around us once more.

Episode 24: Xenogenesis (gimme a break! Nes are hard)

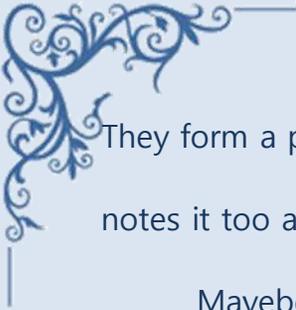
he sits on the ground beside a bonfire of driftwood, holding her hands out to the leaping flames. Early morning sunlight glitters from her crystal and gossamer gown. A cloud of golden hair floats about her head.

I only saw Lucia Darkmore one time before, long ago. It was on her wedding day and she wore this dress as she walked beside Avery LaCroix. She rises and I see the dark splotch of fresh blood staining the right sleeve and bodice of the gown. The flickering reflection of red fire in her green eyes sends a shiver rippling along my spine.

"Hello, Clarissa. Good morning, Aurora." She smiles and beckons us to join her. "You both look like warmed over cabbage. Time's a funny thing isn't it?"

The sounds of merriment dull and cease. Slowly but inexorably Darkmores and La Croixs set aside their plates and glasses, their instruments and diversions.





They form a protective circle, intent on the scene playing out in its center. Lucia notes it too and the color of her eyes deepens to a dark, sea green.

Maybelle trembles like a leaf and Aurora wraps her arms around the frightened, scarred woman. I take my child from Maybelle, yielding to the overwhelming need to feel my child in my arms. Beside Maddock, I wait—summoning what little magic I can manage.

Clarissa closes the distance between herself and Lucia, her voice as measured as her steps. The spell plaited in her words conjures calm and clarity.

“Lucia, you must stop. A thousand years is long enough.”

“Has it been a thousand years?” Lucia scans the faces of Darkmores and La Croix now is a solid ring, hands clasped together, eyes watchful. Her composure wavers and her voice loses its strident tone. “A thousand years. How strange.”

“You have no reason to continue this madness.” Clarissa takes another small step toward Lucia.

“Reason?” Lucia’s eyes narrow. “We all have our reasons. Avery had reasons to murder father and I had reasons to—” her voice catches “—kill Avery. You have reasons to want me dead. A plague of witches—that’s what we are. A thousand years, you say? For me, the Universe ended last night. How odd it continued to live for the rest of you.”

Her green eyes survey the circle of LaCroix and Darkmore witches.





"Darling, you've been trapped, I think, in an eddy of time." Clarissa inches closer to her younger sister. "The tragedy is lost in the past for us—and you must leave it there."

"I wasn't trapped, sister," snaps Lucia. "I know what I'm doing."

Her cold gaze shifts to the squirming child in my arms. I clutch little April, May, or June protectively, but I meet Lucia's eyes with a cold stare of my own.

"I remember you," she says. "Luck has been on your side twice, hasn't it, my dear? First on my wedding night and again on yours. You know what they say: 'Third time's the charm.'"

As graceful as a swan she spins. Amidst a swirl of white gauze and golden hair, her arm traces an arc in the cold spring air. A cloud of crystals spills from her outstretched fingers. Thirteen glittering stones tumble in slow motion. Sparking with morning sunlight, suspended in space and time, they drift across the cobalt sky like wayward stars—effervescent, shimmering, inescapable.

"Time Crystals," gasps Maddock, his arm tight around me.

"Don't break the circle," hisses Clarissa.





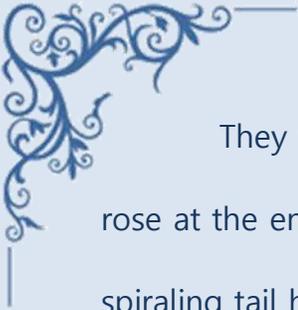
Episode 25: Yesterday, Tomorrow, and Never

Long ago, my great-great-great grandmother lived halfway up the mountains on the eastern border of Highmoor Province near the cataracts. In those nearly forgotten days, expectant mothers spent their confinement before bearing children in solitude, attended only by a trusted friend or relative. According to legend, she and her closest friend made their way to a cavern in the heights and settled in for the remaining weeks before my great-great-great-grandmother's first child was to be born.

While they waited for the baby, a violent storm rose. Intense rain flooded the cavern. My great-great-great granny and her friend fled to the upper levels and weathered the storm safely. When the sky cleared and the rumble of thunder faded, they cautiously investigated the damage.

The entire rear wall of the cavern had collapsed to reveal a corridor of worked stone leading down toward the roots of the mountains. My ancestor and her friend explored the cave by the light of an enchanted staff. They passed half buried bones of giant creatures and the broken foundations of massive columns. Far beneath the surface, they were about to turn back for fear of becoming lost in the twisting passageways, but my great-great-great granny saw the faintest light farther down the passage.





They followed the growing luminescence to its source. A wall of black stone rose at the end of a narrow chamber. The likeness of a multi-headed beast with a spiraling tail had been carved into the smooth stone. Thirty white crystals shone in the eyes of the massive carving.

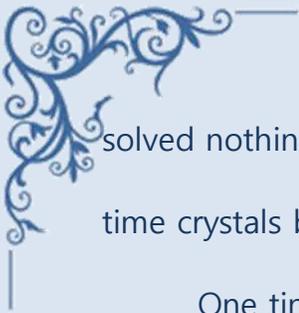
There, deep beneath the mountains, the pain of childbirth overtook my great-great-grandmother. Her child was born with the crystals as witnesses.

She and her friend pulled one tiny crystal from the carving before they made their way back to the surface. The crystal, so the story goes, fizzed and bubbled when exposed to air and sunlight.

Excited to introduce the new baby to the family, they hurried down the mountain. But their home was not as they had left it. The two women had been gone for over one hundred years, a substantial length of time even in the long-lived Darkmore and La Croix families. She told her story and her husband returned to the cavern and retrieved the remaining stones, careful to keep them in sealed vial of quartz. And so the time crystals came into my family.

The stones proved more dangerous than useful. Once exposed to light and air, their peculiar effect threw time into consternation, often spinning the user out of time's current and into an eddy far from the main concourse. So the stones were hidden away, but both Darkmores and La Croix lay claim to the shimmering stones for my great-great-grandmother's friend was a La Croix. The vial containing the entire store of crystals changed hands through war and intrigue. Centuries of conflict





solved nothing and when both families were decimated by Lucia's mad tantrum, time crystals became the least of our worries.

One tiny crystal tossed New Darkmore Castle and a thousand inhabitants eight months into the future. What can thirteen stones do? Will we be forever suspended in this limbo? Will we awaken to an Earth reformed by the millennia?

The glittering crystals spin against the cobalt blue sky. An opalescent haze rises from the east until the vault of sky above the valley shimmers with it. Time twists around us, but the circle of La Croix and Darkmore witches holds tight. Days, months, years—perhaps centuries warp around Highmoor Valley but inside the dome of pearly light, we remain untouched.

The crystals float, serene and effervescent.

The child in my arms splutters and coos, her rose petal lips round and pink. Her indigo eyes focus on the time crystals and her baby fingers twitch. As if in answer, the crystals spiral together. The twisting vortex whirls toward us until they hover just beyond the reach of her chubby fingers.

"Gather them in the vial if you can, Maddock." Clarissa's voice, low and intense, wakens me from a stupor. I draw in a cold, spring-scented breath.

Maddock stirs beside me. He reaches into his vest pocket and draws forth a clear vial. Inside it, seven more stones glitter.

"No!" Lucia swirls toward us in a froth of golden hair and gossamer gown.





The circle of family draws closer. Their combined wills manifest into a soft, blue sphere around the raging woman. Clarissa steps inside the sphere and intercepts her sister's course.

"It's done, darling. You don't have to fight anymore." Aunt Clarissa pinions Lucia's arms, holding her close and pressing her pale cheek against Lucia's.

Lucia struggles but even she can't fight the sleep spell conjured by a thousand witches. Her green eyes close and she slumps in her sister's arms.

Maddock's gaze never wavers from the spinning stones above our child's upturned face. Ever so gently he removes the stopper from the clear quartz vial and tilts the mouth of the vial upward.

My daughter's lips curve into her first smile. Her strange, dark eyes reflect the glow of the time crystals. Soundless and mesmerizing, the glittering crystals spin into the vial. Maddock pops the stopper in place.

Aunt Clarissa sinks with Lucia to the ground. A thousand witches stand in a ring, hands clasped.

Episode 26 Zed

The day is nearly spent yet we've reached no agreement. The time crystals are safe in Maddock's pocket and both Darkmores and La Croix seem satisfied to





let them remain there. Lucia sleeps, cocooned in a soft, blue hex, but her fate is the subject of much discussion.

"In the old days, we would have beheaded Lucia strait away." Magnus La Croix rages at the combined council of Darkmore and La Croix elders. "I've waited a thousand years for this."

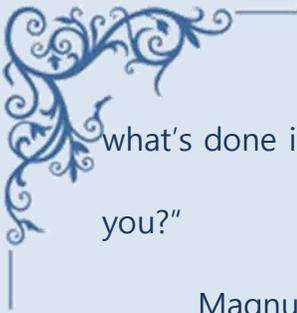
Maddock shakes his head. "Until we can offer life as a reward, death as punishment is little more than revenge."

"You dishonor those who died. You dishonor those who remained scarred by what Lucia did." Magnus points toward Mayebelle who glares back with her good eye. "How can we allow Lucia to live? She shows no sign of remorse and would visit the same tragedy on us again if she could."

Aurora La Croix, sitting between Maddock and Clarissa on a mound of cloaks and leaves near the bubbling stream, tips a goblet of clear white wine to her ruby-tinted lips. She's had time to reapply the beauty glamour, I see. I pat my own unruly hair and pinch my cheeks to heighten the color. Appearance isn't my primary concern, but I'd hoped my first event with my new in-laws would be more glamorous. I'm comforted in that the entire group of Darkmore and La Croix relatives bears traces of the long night and disturbing morning.

Aurora, palate clean and throat clear, levels a squelching gaze at her third cousin on her father's side. "Sit down and be quiet, Magnus. We all lost family but





what's done is done. The old ways didn't work. Aren't the signs clear enough for you?"

Magnus eyes Aurora with a cold blue eye but clamps his teeth together, unwilling to challenge Aurora further.

Maddock pours Magnus another drink and hands the goblet to the still fuming man. "I understand your anger. We all share it. But I'm not willing to mar my daughter's first day of life with murder. How can we teach our children mercy if we don't practice it ourselves? Is her first lesson to be that murder begets murder? We must find an alternative."

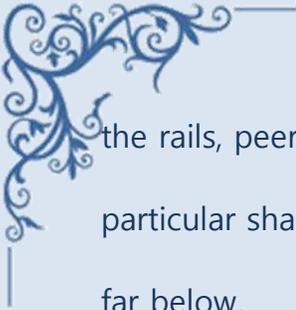
My child dozes in a sunbeam, her surprising thatch of reddish hair catching the shimmer of the first day of spring. Whatever effect the time crystals have had on the outside world, inside the valley, the day is clear and sunny. The memory of exile seems only the shadow of a dream—soon forgotten.

I hand the baby to Mayebelle and stand so everyone can hear me.

"I have an idea."

We counted an entire year inside the valley. Our new house rises on a prominence overlooking the lake which now fills Highmoor Valley. On calm days, Maddock and I take our ginger-haired, indigo-eyed daughter boating, skimming on the crystal surface. At a certain point, midway across the lake, she loves to peek over





the rails, peering into the blue depths. If the day is clear and calm and the sky a particular shade of blue, the murky outline of Old Castle Highmoor flickers into view far below.

It is a mirage, a strange effect produced by a single time crystal spinning at the center of a black witch stone. Inside the mirage, Lucia wanders in the Time Before—a time of joy and hope for her—an eddy far from the rushing stream of Time, cut off and inaccessible. She won't be alone, as I was in my exile. Her memories of the Time Before populate her world. She lives but is forever exiled inside an eddy of Time.

Our guests ventured forth, at last, leaving Highmoor Province in tight, worried groups. Those who returned, tell of a world much changed. Throughout the year, as courage returned to them, they scattered again to the four winds.

The Time Before is real only in the mirage at the bottom of the lake. The Time After and the Time to Come are stored in a clear quartz vial. In this Time That Is, Maddock and I are content to remain at home in Highmoor province. Our families have no room for ancient fears and so Maddock and I name our indigo-eyed daughter Lucia.

Today, Lucia and I will plant thirteen cherry tomato plants in the freshly turned garden. In time, their prickly, aromatic leaves will stretch to the sun. Yellow blooms will produce tart, red fruit and the summer will lead to autumn.

