

C.A. MOSS

HERBS and HARMONIES

HOW I BECAME A THERAPIST IN ANOTHER WORLD
OMNIBUS 2

Herbs and Harmonies

How I Became a Therapist in Another World
Omnibus 2 (Books 5, 6, 8)

C.A. Moss

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Starting Over in Another World with My Level 99 Self-Doubt and *The Ballad of the Bardbarian* Copyright © 2024 by C.A. Moss

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Content Notes

A literal note about content: This omnibus contains books 5, 6, and 8. Book 7 will appear in the next omnibus with two more stories about the Dread Army.

The Sylvan Dragon's Herald includes:

- Violence: A character has a crossbow pointed at them; this is on the first page, but it doesn't get more violent than that
- Two brief mentions of gender dysphoria, specifically one moment of self-consciousness about the narrator's voice and one about her clothes
- A couple of mentions of an unsupportive family of origin, not related to gender
- Extended depictions of social anxiety / agoraphobia, including panic attacks
- Extended depiction of depression
- Some scary demon imagery (Hazel and Morel's demons as seen in book 1, the agoraphobia / social anxiety panopticon serpent demon and the depression slime monster)
- Mild f/f romance references (nothing more than hand-holding on page)
- Brief mentions of mind control magic (in reference to Book 1)

Starting Over in Another World with My Level 99 Self-Doubt includes:

- A moderate amount of swearing

- Frequent references to alcohol use; the narrator works as a bartender
- Several references to poverty and struggling under poverty / late-stage American capitalism, including struggling to access health care, dumpster diving, buying secondhand goods, and living in shared housing by necessity
- Brief, indirect references to drug use
- Brief, indirect references to violence
- A moment of dysphoria related to clothes/presentation

The Ballad of the Bardbarian includes:

Multiple instances:

- Depiction of a controlling friendship, with emotional abuse and verbal altercations
- Creepy demon scenes (shadow tentacles)
- Antagonist POV chapters
- Some swearing
- References to m/m attraction, overall mild (blushing and butterflies, long looks, a little hand-holding)

Brief but present:

- Threatening magic (first chapter)
 - References to homophobic bullying (verbal), not quoted on-page
 - References to amatonormativity / arophobia (discrediting / regarding as “lesser” anyone who doesn’t feel romantic love), which the character conflates with acephobia (discrediting / regarding as “lesser” anyone who doesn’t feel sexual attraction)
 - References to religious trauma and familial abuse/control, including destruction of property and a homophobic conversion camp
 - References to body dysmorphia and eating disorders
 - References to past character death (in the context of a reincarnation story), without detail
 - Depressive behavior and negative internal monologue in a couple of chapters
 - References to grief over a past relationship
- Please read at your own discretion.

The Sylvan Dragon's Herald

How I Became a Therapist in Another World book 5

C.A. Moss

November: The Herald

I gained a second job in my forty-seventh winter. Or perhaps I should call it a volunteer position; there was certainly no payment involved. Much later, I might even label it a calling. But at the beginning, it was a job. One I halfway regretted accepting.

The farmer pointed a crossbow directly at my chest. “You’re who?”

“My name is Hazel. I’m a witch of the Southern Forest. I’m here on behalf of Morel the sylvan dragon.” The wingbeats of said dragon whooshed in the distance. I didn’t have much time. Under the farmer’s glare, my heartbeat raced. It wouldn’t help to draw the demon in, on top of everything else. I attempted to at least appear calm.

The crossbow lowered an inch, still very much in range of some vital organs. “The one who sells charms and whatnot?”

“Yes, that’s me. But that’s not why I’m here today.” The horse I’d rented shifted half a step under me, its hooves crunching in the thin layer of snow covering the road. Morel didn’t scare horses. Humans with crossbows might. I could relate. “Morel is bringing back the property they stole from you last summer. I’m here to let you know that they come in peace.” The wingbeats grew louder, and the farmer’s glances over my shoulder more frequent.

“My property?” He squinted past me into the distance. “Four head of cattle and the weathervane off our barn?”

“Ah.” I cleared my throat. “The weathervane, at least. I’m afraid the cattle are no more.” Even so, I made a mental note about the cattle. Morel would want to know.

The crossbow bolt’s tip dropped another couple inches. “It’s bringing back my *weathervane*?”

Snow swirled past me as a powerful wingbeat buffeted it from the ground. The farmer’s crossbow snapped up, and my teeth gritted. That thing would do grievous harm to me or

to the poor horse, but it would pose little more than a nuisance to a dragon. Besides, the man's life was not remotely in danger, no matter what he thought. I was here to convince him of that fact.

I don't think it was working.

In the interest of keeping the crossbow in my sight, I didn't turn around. I could hear the vast creature breathing behind me and the crunch of snow under their claws. Metal squeaked, precisely like a weathervane in a high wind.

Human, the dragon of the Southern Forest said into our minds. *Has my herald made clear my deep and sincere remorse —*

"Drop it," the farmer barked.

Scales and wing membranes stirred behind me. I risked a glance in my peripheral vision, and caught sight of a green-and-bronze nose as the dragon reared back in surprise. All the same, the dragon pitched the weathervane forward in a soft underhand throw. It bounced and rolled, gouging the snow and spinning on its mount with a dreadful screech. My horse danced sideways. The weathervane came to rest short of the farmer's feet.

"Get off my land," the man said in a steely voice. "If we see one scale of your accursed hide again, we're calling the town watch *and* the mageknight."

The pressure of the dragon's thoughts pierced into my mind, but Morel did not form their protest into words. Instead, snow crunched and scraped as the dragon retreated. I took the risk of turning my horse around, despite the itch in my shoulder blades at the thought of the crossbow.

In doing so, I finally got a clear look at my — employer? Co-conspirator? Their head hunched low, belly almost pressed to the snowy ground, ridges along their spine lifted in some strong emotion. They took a few scrambling steps and lifted off, whipping a downdraft toward those of us on the ground. Their blunt claws dangled beneath them as they flew. They'd returned the treasure they'd taken. The cattle had been eaten long ago. There was nothing else to carry.

I nudged my heels into the horse's sides. We took off along the country road, following the dragon in defeat.



“The farmer said he lost four cattle,” I informed the mountain of snow-dusted scales lying in the glade.

I know. I remember.

“...Oh.” I hesitated. My rented horse shifted its weight calmly and blew out a steaming breath. “Sorry. I thought you might want to keep track.”

What am I to do about the animals I have eaten? A ridge of scales shook off snow as it rose, and the shape of the dragon’s neck and head separated from the bulk of its side and its limp wings. A golden eye opened a sliver, the pupil slitting against the snow-glare. *They cannot be returned. Or brought back to life.*

“...True,” I admitted. A low rumble rattled up from the dragon’s chest, less of a growl than a grumble. The enormous creature turned over, one wing flopping over their side and the other crushed into the ground. I was presented with the long chain of armored plates down the dragon’s spine and the hunched muscles that anchored their wings. Snow sifted silently from above.

I drew a long breath and let it go as quietly as I could, though it might still sound like a sigh to the dragon’s keen hearing. Looked like my shift was over. “I’m going to take this horse back to town. You know where to find me next time.”

One of the wing muscles twitched.

I was great at this.



Despite my mood, which was marginally better than the dragon’s, I had to get this horse home. I’d never owned a horse or even a mule. Every couple of weeks, or once a month when the snow piled high, I loaded my potions and charms into a basket and walked into town to sell them to my usual suppliers. I bought supplies: food, wool, any goods I couldn’t make or grow myself. I walked back. It was simple.

However, it was not a system that worked for this new assignment of roving the countryside, returning stolen goods. So a mount was required. This was only my second time out, and my first attempt at accompanying the dragon on my own. Bringing another animal into the mix more permanently seemed like more trouble than it was worth for a temporary favor I’d decided to do for a friend.

The afternoon cleared up as I rode, the clouds shredding apart to reveal a cold, bright sky. The road into town from the south was well trodden, the snow packed into a surface that posed no challenge to the horse. I passed a farmer's wagon rolling south, likely on his way home from market. Conscious of his attempt to place my face, I pulled my scarf further up and gave him a nod.

I'd make this a quick trip. Grab some supplies in town and begin the walk home before dusk fell. The friend who had set me on this mad quest lived in Crystalbrook, but she'd seemed harried and busy the last several times I'd seen her. I wouldn't meet with her just to complain. I'd give this a few more tries first. Our first outing, when she'd come along, had gone better than this one. Certainly it had to go that way sometimes. Right?

Worse, Lavender might offer to take this task off my hands, and I knew full well she didn't have the time or energy to do so. I wasn't about to be party to my friend working herself into exhaustion. I could handle this.

As I entered the town, the houses and shops broke up the winter wind. The partial relief from the cold and the soothing enclosure of the buildings around me helped to counteract the growing sense of being observed. People knew me in this town. The witch of the woods. Not feared, not hated, I knew; only recognized. The one who makes the charms and potions. Not even the only such practitioner in this area, mind you. But for some reason, you combine "charm-and-potion practitioner" and "lives alone in a cottage in the woods," and you seem much more mysterious than Mrs. Johansson three streets over who also makes charms and potions, and turns up every Tuesday at the Church of the Many-Tongued God to gossip and drink lemonade.

At least I guess that's how we'd gotten to this point. I wasn't about to ask. I just knew that people noticed me. And if too many people noticed me or if one person noticed me too keenly, things got ugly.

The horse seemed comfortable merging among the other riders and wagons. I urged her along, rationalizing that she would be happy to get back to her warm stable. Or maybe I was — what would Lavender call it? Projecting. My friend was a counselor, what she called a therapist, a word from the world she'd come from. She had a term for every kind of humanoid behavior, though she usually refrained from tossing them around in casual conversation.

I walled out the thought of the other riders and wagon drivers around me by imagining my own hearth, my own rocking chair, brewing some tea in one of my old familiar mugs.

I could almost feel my cat Ginger draped in my lap, preventing me from moving for the rest of the evening.

As the horse and I passed along the edge of the busy market in the center of Crystalbrook, the daydream drained away; the lively hum of activity was too hard to ignore. The muscles in my back froze up. You couldn't avoid the market if you intended to buy supplies in Crystalbrook, since several of the local farmers and artisans only offered their wares in the open-air stalls there. I could duck in and out of stores for some of the things I needed, but eventually I'd have to venture into the maze of tents and booths that was packed with people even on a winter afternoon. A flicker of silver streaked through my peripheral vision, and I swallowed hard. Not now.

There was plenty of firewood stacked in my yard. Bundles of dried mushrooms and herbs in the root cellar, as well as food for my cat in jars on the shelves. The flour canister in the kitchen was at least a third full. There were baskets of unspun wool and undyed yarn sitting next to my chair by the fireplace. My shelves held components for countless charms sorted soothingly into compartmented boxes. I could stay busy and feed myself and Ginger for a while longer. But I couldn't put it off indefinitely. Sooner or later, the demon would catch up with me.

At the stable, an employee led the horse into her home stall for grooming and food and rest. Back on my own slightly unsteady feet, I settled the bag over my shoulder and pushed out into the chilly afternoon. Butter, eggs, fish for Ginger. We could do with more root vegetables and winter greens. Holding inane thoughts about cabbage and kale in my head to block everything else, I walked toward the market. I'd been visiting Crystalbrook for decades. I knew the way almost without looking.

The crowd closed around my shoulders like deep, cold water as I passed into the aisle between the stalls. I focused on the people whose backs were turned, lumpy and drab in layers of cloaks and coats, hats or hoods pulled low to block the cold air and the bright sun. Looking through bolts of fabric or crates of produce. Hagglng with the merchants. Steering their horses or carts in the other direction, away from the market and out of my sight. There were plenty of those.

But not enough. Upturned faces, curious stares, narrowed *do-I-know-you?* eyes. A glance, a second glance, a held gaze. I hurried toward the first stall on my agenda and slipped in among the shoppers, shoulder to shoulder, sweating under my layers. Picked out some potatoes, onions, and turnips, then a couple of bundles of kale. The beginnings

of a nice winter soup. I didn't haggle. Never did. Hardly talked to the merchant, though I'd been buying her produce for years. She didn't chitchat. I appreciated that.

The vegetables made a reassuring ballast at the bottom of my bag. Look, I told my agitated heartbeat and my shaking hands in their mittens, if the demon comes back, Lavender gave me some coaching about how to banish it. Though one of her main strategies was to deputize the alchemist's assistant to come along and carry my packages; since I hadn't begun with selling my potions today, my strategy was upended. I was on my own.

I was always on my own. A hissing whisper reminded me of this: not real, not imaginary. I rubbed my eyes as I emerged into the sunlight, driving away the flicker of silver that haunted the corners of my world.

Correction: everyone else's world. *My* world was waiting at the end of a path in the woods. This was no more my world than the moon would be, or the fantastical place the Visitors fell from, full of machines and smoke. Crystalbrook was necessary because I couldn't grow or gather everything I needed. It was not my home.

I ducked my head, now aching with the strain of willing the demon away, and headed into another stall to buy eggs and butter. Like many of the stalls in the market, this was an outpost for one of the nearby farms. I didn't know the employee or distant relation that staffed the table this time. A stranger among strangers.

"Can I interest you in a jug of milk? Freshest in town!" He thrust it in my eyeline, an earthenware half-gallon so cold that frost glazed the surface of the ceramic.

"No thank you." Turning aside to the pyramid of paper-wrapped bricks of butter, I selected two. Some baking tomorrow might be just the thing.

"Aw, come on. It's delicious! Here, we have samples." A hand pushed a paper cup at me, and I stepped back, bumping into another shopper. She grumbled. My vision blurred as I stammered an incoherent apology.

"A-a dozen eggs," I blurted. My mind had absorbed all the *pleases*, repeating them silently as if it would forestall the inevitable.

"Sure you don't want any milk?"

"No, dammit," I snarled. Time stopped. Every face turned my way. The entire horizon was a jumble of people, swathed in scarves or bare-faced, every human and elven shade, the moss green of an orcish jawline, even the tawny fur of a catfolk boy as he licked the

last of one of the samples off his whiskers. All blurred and ran together, a circle of eyes riveted on me.

Silver flashed in my peripheral vision, flickering and coalescing into a mirrored, serpentine body that coiled around me. Razor-sharp claws pierced through layers of scarves and coats as though they were no more substantial than smoke. I had to be bleeding. Pure mammal instinct told me that, just as pure mammal instinct told me I was being hunted. That I was being watched. That I would always be watched, every second I ventured outside the safety of the forest. That it would never end.

Never never never never, the demon agreed, whispering through its mirrored hide. Its staring red eyes never took their gaze from me. They couldn't. The eyes covered every inch of the demon's skin, never blinking, pointed in all directions.

The other shoppers backed away now. Their turn to trip and apologize. My knees buckled, and I went down in a heap among their snow-dusted legs. One woman made an instinctive move to pull the thing off me, but soon apologized and melted into the crowd.

Demons could only touch the one they haunted. And yet pure mammal instinct told the good people of Crystalbrook to back away. From me, if not from the demon. To gather their children against their sides and hurry away.

Meanwhile, the demon's claws tightened, digging into my collarbone. It couldn't speak except in echoes, rippling in glee at the shoppers' reaction. Proof of the certainty that fed it: I should not have come here. I did not belong here.

The claws hurt, and the sun-bright streak of the demon's uncanny body drew more stares, feeding it further. But I wouldn't get home to safety except under my own power. I gathered my knees under me and pushed to my feet, feeling my joints crackle in protest. I picked up the bag I'd dropped and the bricks of butter, safe in their wrappers. The demon hovered in a spiral around me as I dug into the money bag in my pocket. "A dozen eggs," I repeated, roughly, then reached for "—please."

Behind the table, the farmer's cousin-or-whomever had gone nearly as pale as the milk he hawked. He scrambled to gather the eggs in a basket and stammered out a price. I paid it, then slipped the butter into my bag atop the vegetables and tucked the egg basket under my arm. With the silver monstrosity reflecting the winter sun, I slowly walked out of the market stall.

The demon rode with me, goading me with choice snippets of the conversation in the market. All it could do was whisper words grabbed from others' mouths or my own,

knowing my own mind would supply the worst possible context. There wasn't much it could do with my "trout, please" at the fishmonger's.

Every step convinced me I would bleed out under my coat, and the world seemed lined in staring eyes. Carrying the packet of fish on top of the egg basket and the bag over my shoulder, I turned south, toward the road home. Step by step, my feet numb in their boots, the demon wrapped around my neck. Whispers followed us. Me.

After this long day and the thwarted quest with the dragon, I didn't have the strength to argue with the demon. When I could manage it, I told myself there was nothing to fear from these people. They never harmed me, for all their gossipy staring. My own fear fed the demon, not any threat from outside. If I simply refused to fear, I could banish it in an instant.

This afternoon, I could not. I walked, shoulders stooped like a woman three decades older, until my feet met the snow-packed road at the edge of town. The crowds had been left behind. Empty fields swept with wind marked my passage. And starved of paranoia, the demon flickered and winked out.

November: A Life Constructed

The fire crackled, driving the chill away within the snug stone walls of my home. My fish-stuffed cat sprawled over my lap and snored softly, which forced me to hold my book high enough to clear her furry side. It was a small price to pay for perfection.

I had built my life stone by stone over the last twenty-plus years. This cottage had existed before me, and the forest itself was more ancient than any mere humans could comprehend. By those measures, I was a latecomer to this end of the forest. I'd saved my earnings from selling charms out of a backpack in my roaming youth and bought this place from the woodcutter who had inherited it. It had been his mother's retirement cottage, after she'd spent her own long decades as a midwife in Crystalbrook. The history of the place appealed to me, though I had never met the old wisewoman. The story had seemed aspirational even then.

To be fair, I was only halfway to catching up with the cottage's original owner, who'd made it a solid ninety years. But I'd done my best. Built bookshelves and filled them with books, including my own notes on potions and dyes, which I now reviewed over my sleeping cat. Planted a garden and fenced it against the rabbits. Slowly amassed a wardrobe of exactly what I wanted to wear, collected on my trips into town or bartered from neighbors. A succession of excellent cats had accompanied me, and for a while, a hound that I would always remember fondly.

Piece by piece, I'd constructed my life, and so I was here on this winter night: fireside, cat, blanket over my lap that I had knitted myself; volume of notes written in my own hand. My meticulously built dream had not so much come true as it had been made true, by sheer force of will. Everything was as I wanted it.

Watching the flames, I was tempted to think that all would be perfect if it weren't for the trips into town. Though that wasn't quite true. There was something to be said

for tea or lunch with my friend, or stumbling across an unexpected find in a shop. I'd established a good working relationship with the local alchemist, who gave me a fair price for my potions and even some of my mundane dyes. I'd gathered enough of a clientele that the charms I made rarely lay in their storage box for long. And as a charm-maker, I was respected: those who bought from me, or who came to me on the recommendation of someone who had, knew my work was sound and my prices fair. There were reasons to venture among people. I had to admit that.

My restlessness overcame my reluctance to disturb Ginger's nap. I set the book aside and stood, picking up my cat as I did and bequeathing her my chair cushion instead. She stretched, turned around, formed herself into a furry circle, and went back to sleep. I slotted the book into its place on the shelf and gathered the tools of my primary trade: leather roll of delicate pliers and tweezers, as a jeweler might use, and a box separated into dozens of tiny compartments, each holding a different variety of beads or stones or coils of wire. Shaking off my thoughts, I sat at the table to sink into the task.

The movements of the craft were soothing: measure a length of wire, snip it off with cutters, blunt the cut end with a file so it would not scratch. My stock of finding charms had run low. These were a favorite among the foragers and hunters that also made the forest their home. My fingers found a green stone speckled with spots like moss. Good for a forager, especially in the winter, when there was so little to be found. I trusted my intuition. I always had. It was part of my gift.

The College of Mages would hardly consider my gift magical, but it was effective. Everything I made worked, as long as it was made with care and attention. My potions never failed. My charms always worked. Even my cookies stayed fresher than most other bakers' would have. My potions or charms or cookies weren't of exceptional quality, at least not beyond what one might expect with my experience and skill. But they were reliable. It had always been that way, a trait born in me as deeply as the color of my eyes.

Winding the wire around the stone, I threaded smaller beads on it in the intricate pattern laid down by generations of practitioners. Tasked to build a charm for a rarer purpose, I would refer to my own notes or to reference books I had collected over the years. But this was routine. Finding charms, love charms — which didn't work the way most people thought they did — charms for safe travel, safe births, relief from sickness. All the everyday hopes that might benefit from some assurance. The patterns and components were as familiar as the steps of a dance.

A witch's work was not the work of a mage, undoing illness or whisking someone from the brink of death. It was slower. More careful. Like a trickle of water deep underground. Like a stone warmed on a hearth and carried in your pocket, not the fire itself. Leaning on luck to fall in our favor. Maybe the results wouldn't be exactly what you wanted, but charms were less likely to have unintended consequences. And they did not require extensive training in a faraway city to master, which was an important feature for the daughter of a penniless hunters' family in the southern marshlands.

I'd begun to learn the craft at my grandmother's side. She had believed me when I said I would be a witch like her when I grew up. And I had: long skirts, bookshelves, cat and all.

No one was learning the craft at my side.

My hands stilled at their task. That wasn't exactly the problem. Was it? If some child of the village had come wide-eyed to my door and asked to learn the craft, I would do my best to teach them. For a second, I'd wondered if Lavender, wandering dazed out of the forest, had come to ask for an apprenticeship. No; she had simply fallen out of her world into ours, and gone on to fight demons and find her own life. Since then, every knock on my door had been an ordinary customer, a fellow forest-dweller asking for a trade or bringing news, or a certain sylvan dragon with a strange task.

I knew the face and name, and in some cases the entire life story, of everyone who had knocked on my door in the last year. Considering the deep-seated terror that had drawn the demon to haunt me, I might expect this to be good news. And I told myself it should be, as I hastened to finish the foraging charm. But...some of my former regular customers no longer came to my door. Some because they were too old to make the journey from town. Some were further away. And I had gained some from recommendations, but...

The strange siblinghood of the forest seemed a stable thing. Hunters, foragers, woodcutters, the occasional religious zealot; and now, restored to their rightful place, the sylvan dragon Morel. We left one another alone for the most part, meeting to pass along important news or barter, then retreating to our scattered homes.

Lavender, the Visitor who had wandered onto my doorstep on her first day in this world, had turned out to be a good friend. We met when I came into town, at least when she wasn't busy, and caught up over lunch or tea.

No one else had entered my sphere in a long time.

It had been a long time since my grandmother passed on. Since I picked up my backpack and left to make my way on the path I knew was mine, the one my grandmother had believed in. And I was still on that path. But it did not connect the way my grandmother said life always did, circles in circles. It was a straight line, narrowing as it went.

I'd built my world meticulously, and I loved what I had built. But now I felt how small its boundaries were. Had it always been this way?

The foraging charm fit neatly into a compartment in the box I reserved for finished pieces. Completing a task eased a little of the restlessness in my chest. It would have to be enough for now.



A knock on my door: four brisk strikes, not the dull, heavy taps of a dragon attempting to interact with human-scale architecture. I raised my head from my latest charm, and Ginger raised hers from her nap. We looked at one another. She yawned. I set down my pliers and wire and got up to answer the door.

Outside stood a humanoid figure, riding leathers dark against the snowfall, hood pulled up and scarf wrapped high. I recognized the keen brown eyes and tan skin over the scarf: Rowan, a human hunter who lived at the northwestern edge of the forest. Pulling the lower half of the door open, I stepped back. “Come in, come in.” In the depths of winter, it was polite to invite a caller in, even for a brief visit.

“Thank you kindly.” Rowan stepped over the threshold, and I closed the door behind us.

“Would you like some tea? I’ve got some blueberry muffins from this morning as well. Dried blueberries concentrate the flavor, I find...”

Babbling. But at least no flash of silver sliced through my vision. Just an awkward middle-aged woman making a fool of herself as usual. And as usual, Rowan offered a solemn nod in response. “Tea would be appreciated.”

That gave me the next step in a procedure I knew, like the building of a charm. I waved Rowan toward the chairs by the fireplace as I headed for the kitchen to put the kettle on. Meanwhile, the hunter knocked snow from her boots by the doorway, carefully scuffed them on the welcome mat, and crossed to the proffered seat in a couple of long strides.

She pushed her hood back and unwound the scarf under it, then pulled off her heavy lined gloves. Under the hood and scarf, her dark hair was pulled into a low bun. Threads of silver along the temples caught the lamplight. She seemed of a generation with me, somewhere in her forties or early fifties. Long enough to hone her craft and build a life of her own.

“How goes it with you, Hazel?” A weight behind Rowan’s neutral question suggested the timing of this visit was not a coincidence.

I had been gathering the box of tea in the kitchen as she asked this, though no spot in my cottage was out of earshot from any other spot. And I suspected she watched my reaction carefully, nothing escaping her notice. Hunters don’t survive as long as Rowan had otherwise.

“Well as ever,” I said. Gathering the sugar bowl and honey pot onto a tray with the tea and cups wasted a few seconds. “What news do you have?”

A smile crossed the hunter’s weathered face as I turned with the tray. “Today you are the news, I’m afraid. Some say you’ve been traveling with the dragon Morel, here and there.”

Some say. The grouchy farmer? The staring townsfolk? Perhaps even Rowan herself; she and her bow ranged all over this area. “Twice, so far.” I set the tray on the end table between the two fireside chairs.

“How does Morel fare? They introduced themselves to all of us when they returned, but little has been heard of them in the last month or so.”

“I’m not sure. They’re free, at least. I can vouch for that.” The dragon that rightfully belonged to this forest had been lured away and put under a curse last summer. Accidentally, according to Lavender’s incomplete tale. “A friend from town assures me that the spell is broken. I trust her word.”

“The demon-slaying Visitor?” Rowan asked. She laced her fingers around one knee, crossed over the other, as I took the other seat in front of the fire.

“Yes.” It was irritating that the local gossip network knew my business. But I suppose it was hardly a secret that Lavender and I were friends.

“She has been seen riding in and out of the forest since the dragon returned,” the hunter said. “It seems she and Morel are acquainted. Happily, one hopes.”

My eyebrows shot up at the suggestion, fair though it may have been in the abstract. Visitors had powerful magical abilities that rarely followed traditional patterns. In fact, a

Visitor in Crystalbrook, Sir Solan the Mageknight, was known to be the only person in the area capable of battling a dragon successfully. Now that Morel had been released from whatever caused them to rampage in the first place, such a battle was no longer necessary, but it spoke to a staggering level of power on the Visitor's part.

Lavender was another story. "I've only known Lavender to fight demons. — Well. In a manner of speaking. She doesn't fight them so much as assist in another's fight. But I can't imagine she's any threat to the dragon."

Rowan spread her hands. "I trust your word, then. But you understand the concern."

"Of course." Other, darker rumors suggested the sword-wielding Visitor had been all too eager to battle the dragon. That perhaps it had been he who influenced the dragon to run wild in the first place. No one knew whether any living creature held that kind of power, but surely no one wanted to risk it. Though I was sure Lavender could not affect Morel in that way, I did not fault anyone for worrying about it.

"Then do you mind me asking what your part in this has been?" Rowan asked.

I wished the tea were ready, so I could stall for time. It remained stubbornly unboiled. "Morel is returning the goods they stole. What can be returned, at any rate. At first, when they appeared, people reacted...badly." With arrows, Lavender had said. Most of which could not realistically hope to fell a dragon, but it didn't stop the archers from trying. "Lavender and I went along with Morel to try to speak for the dragon before anyone resorted to violence. She is short on time these days, so I agreed to take over."

"Because of your acquaintance with the Visitor."

"And my proximity to the dragon's domain, I suppose." And a third factor that I hoped would not make an appearance today. Silver and covered in eyes. It remained to be seen if this practice made any difference in fending off my demon, and I wasn't about to explain an unproven hope about a humiliating condition. "As someone who relies on the forest, I have a stake in helping Morel. It seems arrogant to say that I hope to keep an eye on them, too, but...that's another part of it."

The hunter's smile was more a crinkling around the eyes than it was a movement of her mouth. "Good. Truth be told, I had come to ask you to do just that. All of us worry about the forest's guardian." Rowan made a gesture warding against ill luck.

"Of course." Something about *us* bothered me, for no defensible reason. Charged with restless energy, I stood again and bustled over to the table to pour the tea. "Last chance on the muffins," I added as I handed a cup and saucer to my visitor. "Or cookies?"

“Cookies,” the hunter repeated, considering. “Easier packed for later. Yes, cookies would be much appreciated.”

Make a thing, sell it or give it away. So much easier than talking. My cup and saucer remained on the table, untouched, as Rowan blew over the steaming surface of her tea. I returned to the kitchen to pack some cookies in a tea towel. They’d been baked yesterday, but my gift tended to extend the freshness of the food I made. Apart from their temperature, these may as well have come fresh out of the oven. A solid knot secured the parcel for travel.

Rowan accepted the gift with a gracious nod. “I’ll be sure to return the wrap.”

“No need,” I blurted, and dropped into my seat so abruptly that I almost spilled my tea.

“Nevertheless. We have manners in the wilds, after all.”

I think she was joking. It was hard to tell. With nothing to say, I sipped my tea. Rowan did the same. Eventually Ginger flopped off the couch and made a leisurely pass by our feet. Without spilling a drop, Rowan leaned down to give Ginger’s cheek a scratch.

“Since you’re doing the forest a service by helping our dragon,” the hunter said as she straightened up, “is there anything we can do to help you?”

The debacle in the marketplace last week gave me enough pause to consider the question for an extra minute. “All I lack is a horse, I think. And the space and stable to keep one.” I had spoken flippantly, but Rowan nodded as though I’d meant it.

“Easily done,” she said. “Borrow any of mine, any time you wish.”

“No,” I said without thinking. “I mean — there’s — it’s — that’s too big a favor, Rowan.”

“I can only ride one at a time,” the hunter said implacably. “And it’s rare that all three will be tired from a chase at the same time. Truth be told, I keep them nine-tenths out of love, and they live easy. More exercise on the off days would do them good.”

Curse her logic. My hands were tense around the tea saucer, and my vision swam. Gritting my teeth kept the demon from approaching. Finally I said, “All right. Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome.” Rowan drained the last of her tea and set the cup and saucer delicately on the small table between our chairs. “I won’t keep Ashwith waiting. He’s the craftiest of the three, by the way. I wouldn’t recommend borrowing him unless you’re in a mood to play mind games with a horse.”

I wouldn't have to walk all the way into town every time the dragon summoned me. Only across a section of forest and over an easily crossed stream to Rowan's homestead. Half the distance, at most. Imagining the trip, I drank my tea as my guest replaced her winter gear. I saw her to the door, we traded nods, and she returned to the horse tied to my fence. Before too much cold air could get in, I shut the door.

Service to the forest? Maybe. *Our* dragon?... Something about the phrasing sat uneasily with me. But the task ahead was the same either way. And now I had an ally.

December: Friends of Friends

Another day, overcast and cold. A horse borrowed from Rowan, a spirited bay named Squirrel with a white blaze on her nose. Another destination, a castle in the lush lands that sprawled west of Crystalbrook. It was visible from miles away, its spires lifting above the horizon before its white marble walls, the lower enclosing walls, and the slight hill it sat on. Finally I reached the courtyard outside the vast front doors. A pair of guards in blue livery hailed me from a guardhouse at the gate.

“Good morning,” I said, then cleared my throat. “I come as the envoy of the sylvan dragon Morel. They’re on their way to return some goods stolen from this castle this past summer.”

“A dragon, returning goods?” one of the guards blurted, and the two stared at one another for a second. The other tilted her head toward the castle, and the first grimaced.

I waited for this brief pantomime to conclude, not wanting to...interrupt, so to speak. “Morel wishes to express their deep remorse for their actions. Returning the goods is their way of showing goodwill.”

“Huh,” the first guard said. “Who are you, then?”

I looked over my shoulder. The gray sky showed no sign of bronze wings yet. “My name is Hazel. I’m a witch of the Southern Forest. Morel employs me to explain the situation before they arrive, so that the exchange remains, errrr, peaceful.”

“What d’you think?” the second guard asked the first. “Witch and a dragon?”

“Maybe,” the first said. “Her Ladyship’s busy, but she’d still want to see ’em.”

“We can leave the goods here,” I hastened to explain.

“Oh, well,” the first guard said, shifting her weight to lean against the door of the guardhouse. “The Countess likes to meet new people, you see. She’s a little...”

The first audible wingbeats carved the air in the distance. Swallowing nervously, I gripped the reins through my mittens. In all my time on this side of the forest, I had never spoken to one of the nobles face to face. Some sent servants to buy from me, and their custom was as welcome as anyone else's. But I had not the barest inkling of how to speak to nobility.

"Eccentric?" the second guard suggested neutrally.

"Eccentric," the first agreed. "Visitor, you know."

Perhaps *eccentric* was a fitting outcome to finding oneself in another world, carrying memories of a previous life. "The dragon is on their way," I said. "May we approach peacefully?"

"Sure," the rightmost guard said. "Bring the dragon. Her Ladyship'll love it."



The grooms at the door took Squirrel's reins and led her toward a nearby stable. I climbed the marble steps behind another guard, approaching a pair of doors that soared well over our heads. Behind me, Morel's wingbeats slowed as they approached the courtyard, and finally the heavy *whump* of their landing made me and the guard turn. The dragon uncurled their claws from around a wagonload-sized fistful of tangled metal.

I lifted a hand toward the dragon, sensing uneasiness in their hunched wings. "The lady of the house will be out to meet us, they said. Peacefully."

Morel pushed the pile of loot into a slightly neater pile with their foreclaws. Their eyes darted around the open space and the exposed windows high above. The guards had shown no trace of aggression. Still, I understood Morel's nervousness. Open space. No place to hide. Far away from any allies, except one demon-ridden wood witch with a borrowed horse.

The door slid open, its sheer mass making it rumble and reverberate. Each half was pushed by a servant in blue livery similar to the guards', and between them appeared a human woman dressed in a fur-trimmed velvet cloak. She stepped forward on silent slippers as the doors parted. Her blue eyes lit up as they landed on my draconic employer.

"An actual dragon!" she cried. A wave of dizziness gripped my head, but no flicker appeared in the corner of my vision this time. The noblewoman strode forward and nearly

ran down the steps, hand outstretched in an elbow-length glove. “Honored Dragon, that’s the right title, isn’t it? I’ve never met an actual dragon. Can you believe it, in all this time I’ve been here?” She reached toward Morel’s scaled nose, though the loot stood between them, piled knee-high. Sunlight caught on the jeweled rings she wore over her gloves. The muscles in the dragon’s neck were stiff as Morel stood perfectly still.

I come bringing the goods I stole last summer, in recompense—

The noblewoman stepped back, long skirts swishing, as she took in the pile of metal at her feet. “Oh, the weaponry from the practice yard, yes. My captain of the guard will be pleased to get those back.”

Blunt claws gripped the flagstones, finding no purchase. The dragon’s eyes were wide.

“Ah, thank you, err, ma’am?” I stammered, and ran down a couple of steps to interrupt the interaction that seemed to be, despite all logic, distressing this ancient creature of magic and nature. “We’ll be on our way, your guards mentioned you were busy...”

“Pff.” The noblewoman flipped her hands, catching the sunlight in glittering shards once again. “It’s fine, I could use a break from setting up for the Midwinter ball. I’ve looked at so many napkin options that they’re all blurring together. So tell me, who are you? My guards said you were a witch? Is that different from a mage?”

We didn’t talk about me on these outings. I explained the dragon’s motives, Morel dropped off the loot, we left. At most, I got to come inside for a few minutes and warm up. I’d never been asked to explain my life’s work to a stranger wearing more diamonds than I’d ever seen in my life.

“I-I’m just the dragon’s messenger,” I managed after some more stumbling. “And a witch — errr — I work with charms rather than spells.” My mittened hand instinctively rose to one I wore around my neck, hidden under layers of clothes. “Objects charged with magic that acts indirectly.” Another strange, motion-sick feeling rippled through me, and I reached for a nonexistent support. In a moment, the feeling passed.

“Oh, I think one of my friends wears one of those.” The noblewoman’s fine brow furrowed as she squinted up at me on the stairs. “She said a friend gave it to her, someone who lives in the Southern Forest.”

“I’m from the forest,” I blurted. She must mean one of my noble clients. My panicked mind untangled the words. I could think of one candidate. “...Lavender? The Visitor?”

Before I could take another breath, the noblewoman had charged up the steps and seized my hands. “Yes! You’re her friend from the forest? I love Lavender, isn’t she darling?”

If I could have pulled back and left my arms dangling there as I fled — I was trapped. My vision closed in around the edges. Looking over the noblewoman’s head, I locked eyes with Morel. The dragon’s wings hunched, their claws dislodging stones as they clenched harder.

The words muttered into my head in a quieter tone, as if whispered into my ear alone. *Witch Hazel, I no longer breathe fire, but I can defend you.*

No! I shouted in my mind. *It’s all right. I’m all right.* The face I made probably didn’t qualify as a smile by any stretch. To the noblewoman I said, “Ah, yes, Lavender’s lovely. We’ve been friends since she landed in this world.”

Breaking into a sunny smile, she let go of me at last. “Ha. And I had to send her a raven. But that’s all right, we’re friends now.” She held out one silk-gloved hand to me. “Countess Francesca de Rifare of Castle Riscrivare.”

I clasped the offered hand as I might shake with anyone. She didn’t seem to expect any other sort of courtly gesture; I wasn’t sure what I was thinking I’d do otherwise. Kiss a ring? At any rate, the handshake seemed to suffice. “Hazel, wood witch of the Southern Forest.”

“Oh yes, Hazel! Lavender’s mentioned you. It’s all coming together.” Countess Francesca turned between me and Morel, taking us in. “What marvelous luck. Or — well.” She made a gesture I didn’t recognize, some warding or god’s sign. “I wish we could stop to chat longer, but my staff is waiting on me. Preparations and all. Oh! Come to my Midwinter gala! I’m sure Lavender would love to hang out. She’s bringing her girlfriend too, of course, but it’s not a couple-y event at all. I’ll send you an invitation by raven.”

Midwinter. Gala. Midwinter gala. Midwinter... “Ahh, err, I’ve got plans for Midwinter.” Gods above and below, what a blatant lie. Backed into a corner, striking toward the only way out like a cornered snake. “Thank you very much, though, uh, Countess. We really must be going. Good luck with your gala.” I dodged past her down the stairs. Scrambling into action, a stablegirl brought Squirrel to meet me as Morel ponderously turned around. The Countess, seemingly taking no offense, paused in the doorway. At the foot of the stairs, her servants gathered the wagonload of weapons Morel had left.

I nearly hopped up onto Squirrel's back, refusing the offer of assistance from the blue-uniformed staff. Morel walked alongside me as I headed for the gates. Perhaps they were reluctant to spread their wings with so many people milling about. As soon as we passed through the gates onto the open road, the dragon surged forward and sprang for the sky. Letting Squirrel trot at her own pace, I watched the bronze shape retreat against the blue expanse.



“Morel?”

An out-of-season flower dropped its petals and melted away at my feet, the last in a chain that had led me from my front yard to this frozen glade. All I could see were the snow-laden branches of evergreens and the dark trunks of deciduous trees. Even the small noises of the woodland creatures seemed to cease. It seemed like a sign that I'd reached the right place.

A few more minutes passed before the dragon appeared, stretched in the snow as though they had been there all along. Maybe they had. This was Morel's native territory, after all. All bets were off.

Wood witch. Midwinter approaches. The other human mentioned it.

“It does,” I confirmed. “About a week from now.”

When the forest sleeps, I often sleep. It is restorative. But there is too much to do. The ill-gotten gold still piles high.

Were they asking me for a second opinion? “Most people around here celebrate Midwinter. Crashing their parties might not go over well.”

Crashing their parties?

“Interrupting them.”

I see. The dragon's tail lashed, carving sinuous shapes in the snow. Every day the treasure remains is a weight on my back. Yet... Another lash. I tried not to be reminded of Ginger in a snit. Of course, Ginger's lashing tail couldn't knock me off my feet. It might be counterproductive to go out till Midwinter passes. Yes?

“Ah... I believe so, yes.” My chest felt heavy. Atoning for wrongdoing was one thing, and Morel had caused no small amount of destruction. But this seemed like something else. “If I may?”

The dragon’s eyes narrowed. *Go on.*

“If you need to sleep, Honored Dragon, you should. I don’t think any good will come of running yourself ragged. Everyone in the forest worries about you.”

A grumbling noise accompanied the dragon’s head toss. *Something Lavender might say.*

I had to cover a sudden smile behind my hand. “It’s true.”

More grumbling, which didn’t help my mental comparison to a grumpy cat. *Very well. I will sleep, then. And we will continue this after the season turns.*

“I’ll be here,” I said.



Tap tap tap.

Tap tap tap.

Throwing back the quilts, I slipped my feet into my waiting slippers. One of the advantages of being a charm-maker rather than a mage is the lack of emergencies. Slow magic won’t solve anything that’s on fire or dangling from a precipice. Which narrowed down the potential subjects of this message rather drastically.

I swung the round window frame open, letting in a bracing blast of morning air. “Good morning, Messenger.”

“Message for Hazel of the Southern Forest,” the raven on the windowsill announced.

“I’m she.”

The raven fluffed and settled its feathers. “Ahem. Message begins. ‘Merry Midwinter, Hazel! Or happy Midwinter, or joyous Midwinter. I’ll learn which it is. Hard to believe it’s been almost six months since I came here. Thank you for being my friend. And I wanted to share a song from this time of year from my world. Sorry, raven.’” The raven launched into a few bars of a song about wishing me a merry Solstice and a happy New Year. Message ravens charged extra for singing. Lavender really must have wanted to share this.

“I’ll see you again soon,” the raven continued in its usual tone, though as was typical with message ravens, there was something of Lavender’s cadence in its recitation. “We’ve got to catch up at lunch next week. No excuses! Love, Lavender.’ Message ends.”

“Thank you. I’d like to send a reply, to be delivered tomorrow to Lavender the Visitor on Meadow Street, Crystalbrook. Just a moment.” Leaving the window open, I fetched my coin purse from the desk drawer. “No singing,” I promised, and tucked two copper coins into the pouch hanging around the raven’s neck. “Happy Midwinter, Lavender. I hope you had a lovely time at the gala. I’ve got some stories to share, so no more excuses, agreed. Hot drinks are on me. Love, Hazel.”

The raven snapped a crisp nod and took off in a flutter of feathers. I wasted no time closing the window, though I peered through the frost-edged glass as the small black dot rose above the trees.



Apart from being the shortest day of the year, the solstice seemed no different from any other day this winter. The forest was carpeted in snow, apart from the deepest stands of evergreens that screened it out and left the ground soft with pine needles instead. Some creatures slept; some had changed their coats to white; some hunted as they always had. We folk of speech who decided to make our homes there celebrated in our own ways. Some with family, some with friends, some departing for Crystalbrook or for more distant celebrations.

This particular wood witch had turned down a noble’s Midwinter ball, an invitation staggering to even think about. My only friend of note in town was bound for that same ball, and I had already sent along my well-wishes for the holiday. Pausing as I swept snow from my front walk, I considered my options for the day. Crystalbrook was full of public celebrations; shops and restaurants would offer special fare for the holiday before closing early. The decorations were nice to see, though at the cost of facing streets full of people. A shudder ran through me, but my vision remained clear of menacing silver. A trip to town was off the table.

Since Morel had been persuaded to take a break, I didn’t expect to have to ride out as their envoy. I didn’t expect any customers for charms. So it seemed I was free for the day.

I returned my attention to clearing the front walk. Though no one else was likely to walk this way, I would need to bring in firewood and check the fence around the fallow garden today. Then perhaps I'd venture out to forage. The solstice was an ideal time to harvest some charm components.

A few hours later, I was back inside with a basket full of odds and ends: twigs, seedpods, bits of bark, smooth stones gathered from the edges of a pond, and some dried leaves that would appear completely ordinary to a non-practitioner. The fire revived with some poking and a couple of extra logs. Ginger curled up in front of it to continue her nap as I set about sorting the components into my system of carefully labeled jars and boxes. Everything in its place, easy to find later in the midst of constructing a charm or concocting a potion.

My grandmother had always thrown all of her components into a chest of drawers in her workshop. "Get me a bloodstone, about yea big," she'd say, holding up two pinched fingers, and I'd sigh and start rummaging. When I struck out on my own, I vowed that I'd do things differently. I'd build the charms as she had and follow the centuries of experience before me, sure, but I was done with rummaging.

The memory halted me, palm full of willow bark, unexpectedly pierced with sorrow. The marshland beyond the forest was cold and damp in the winter; the ice could not be trusted. You ventured out at your peril with a stout stick and a good hound by your side to run for help if you fell through into a freezing bog. Sensible people stayed inside and decorated their mantels and toasted the solstice with their loved ones.

It wasn't my identity that kept me away. Not the change of name, not the charms or the visits to transformation mages, not the insistence that I would follow in my grandmother's footsteps instead of my father's. No, that would have been fine, theoretically. I'd even tried to stay for a while after my grandmother died, entertaining the notion of moving into her house and taking over where she left off. But she had been the only one who had wanted me around, and now that she was gone, nothing bound me. Who I was or what I did hadn't caused any of it. I simply didn't belong there, and it turned out I could be a disappointment as a daughter as easily as I could be as a son.

So I hadn't gone back. Not even for Midwinter. At first it had been from anger, and then, when that faded away, from mere habit. There was no need to return. Every so often I told myself I ought to make myself known more, to claim my place, if only at the

periphery. I had nieces and nephews who ought to know about their great-grandmother's legacy. What if one wanted to take up the craft after me?

To do that, I would have to go back. To uproot this life I'd made. To accept the cutting comments, head bowed, because fighting never accomplished anything. To give up being the witch of the woods and be just a crazy old woman, barely tolerated.

Someday, perhaps. Sorting components in my snug cottage as my cat dozed, I pushed that potential future further down the road.

It felt like a decision, and doing so lightened my heart. When the ingredients I'd gathered had been put away in their right places, I went out one more time to cut a few pine branches for the mantel. Nothing elaborate, like the painted glass baubles the markets in Crystalbrook had been selling for the last few weeks. Just a little something borrowed from the forest, lending its scent to the air.

Next, I turned to the kitchen and the task of making cookies. Not too many, or they'd go stale. Or...I could deliver some to Rowan as a thanks for the use of her horses. Tomorrow, in case she'd traveled for the holiday. My gift ensured the cookies would taste as fresh then as this afternoon. The familiar motions of stoking the oven, mixing dough, rolling it out, and laying the unbaked rounds on the baking sheets let the rest of the morning slide by in a peaceful blur. Soon the scent of hazelnuts and cinnamon filled the cottage, blending with the pine boughs' contribution.

While the second batch of cookies baked, I ate bread and cheese for lunch, because no one could stop me. Not a holiday feast fit for company. Merely exactly what I wanted and no more. It went splendidly with tea.

One of the boxes I kept for deliveries would serve to hold the best of the first batch of cookies. On a whim, I wrapped some ribbon around the box and slipped a pine twig under the ribbon. The rest of the cookies went into the usual ceramic jar, except for the plate I fixed for myself.

Plate of cookies, more tea, book from the shelf, seat by the fire. The chair was mine. The fireplace was mine. I'd cut the boughs lying along the mantel with my own hand. My cat sprawled on the couch across the room, soaking in the heat. Somewhere, the spirit of this forest slept under a blanket of snow. I hoped they dreamed of something other than flames and terror and claws laden with gold.