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Chapter 1

It was a good day to be a squirrel.

Then again, it was almost always a good day to be a squirrel. Squirrels, being relatively content creatures, want very little in life; warm sun, tall trees, and bountiful nuts would be enough in most cases, even for the most ambitious members of squirrel-kind. By that logic, a sun-dappled grove of oaks, their branches thick with late-summer acorns, would be heaven on earth. And the babbling brook flowing through it would just be gravy.

So why did the squirrels fear to tread there?

One squirrel, as much an explorer as any squirrel ever was, set out to answer that question. As he crawled into the grove his eyes darted all around. No foxes, dogs, bears, birds, badgers, snakes, or bugs made themselves seen. Chittering, he crept on his furry brown belly to the edge of the brook, sticking his head under the water and gulping up a few mouthfuls. So far, so good. Everything was going rather smoothly until he saw the pyramid.

Certain dubious characters in your life will tell you that squirrels are content creatures. They are not. Squirrels want very little in life, true, but they want a great deal of that very little; every squirrel holds a deep well of greed inside their furry brown bodies, always wanting the warmest sunspot, the tallest tree, the biggest pile of nuts. So, when this squirrel saw a perfectly stacked pyramid of acorns lying untouched on the forest floor, he scampered over without a second thought. Or first, for that matter. The pyramid tumbled to the ground as he began to nibble.

"To hell with this," he must have said to himself, in whatever language squirrels spoke. "Why don't I deserve a snack? I've done enough today."

He was busily stuffing acorns into his cheeks now. Far too busily, as he missed the figure moving in the branches above him.

"Why, not just today. I've had quite the busy life! After all, I was the one who found out what the shiny thing in the stump was. And who first discovered that leaf that tastes kind of bad? This day will be another jewel my crown, another point in which I reap the rewards of my dedication and perseverance!"

Cheeks full, the squirrel began gathering up as many nuts into his little claws as he could. A quiet chant above him went unnoticed.

"It was ME who found these acorns, where my brothers feared to tread! Their cowardice will be their end, and when the cold comes, I will look down from my mountain of riches into their weeping faces, and DEIGN to give them my SCRAPS! ALL SHALL FEAR ME, AND- why is it so hot?"

There was a flash of light and the squirrel detonated.

Still squinting, Louise wiped charcoal and crispy bits of fur from her lilac-colored face. And it had been going so well.

Harsh laughter echoed across the treetops. In her off hand, she held a huge book, bound in something that looked worryingly close to human skin. And it was laughing at her. Flapping its cover open and shut like a mouth, a scratchy voice came from inside the pages. "Ha! Pop goes the weasel, kid. You officially suck."

"It was a squirrel, Tomeas," Louise said, giving the book a grouchy shake.

"Potato, tomato," it laughed. "You made another one of your forest pals into a blood pinata. Let me give you a round of applause, nimrod!" The book slapped its covers together, making a dusty clapping noise.

"Shush." There was a sound of rustling feathers, and a large gray owl roosted on the branch next to Louise, her breast feathers puffed up from embarrassment. A voice like clover honey came from her beak. "I'm so sorry, Lulu, I thought you were ready this time."

"Obviously not, lady," said the book, hacking out another laugh. "You catch the air time on that things tonsils? I couldn't mess a spell up that hard IF I TRIED. And I don't even have fingers anymore! So, what's your excuse, kid?"

Louise gave the book a long, hard stare, then tossed it into the river.

"Thank you, dear," the owl cooed.

The young woman sank into the crook of the tree. "No problem, mom."

The shockwave from an exploding squirrel had quieted the forest. But the buzzing insects and rustling leaves returned gradually, mingling with the late afternoon breeze to form a thick, summery blanket, laying over Louise as she let her legs sway gently below her. She was exhausted, both mentally and physically, but more than that she was tired; this was, by her count, the third time she had attempted to cast a Speaking spell today, and she was tired of failing so murderously. At least the other squirrels had at least stayed in one piece.

Something heavy nestled on her chest and her eyes flicked open. Soft blue light washed over her as the owl peered closely at her face. With a quick peck, she cleaned a smoldering clump from Louise's long chestnut hair, and another peck cleaned the goat-like horns on her brow.

"Missed a spot." Though her mother's beak could only open and shut, the warm smile in her voice was unmistakable. "Want to try again tomorrow? You almost had it."

"Not especially," Louise mumbled. "I'm kind of tired of killing animals. Did you know him, by the way?"

"Um." Her mother paused, feathers fluffing up again. "No," she fibbed, making a mental note to apologize to the dead squirrel's mate. "Never seen the poor fellow in my life."

"Well, at least there's that," the young woman said halfheartedly. "Maybe Tomeas is right. Maybe I do officially suck- yowch!"

Her mother had pecked her on the nose. As Louise rubbed away the darker purple spot, she stood with her left wing cocked slightly, her equivalent of having her hands on her hips. She waved the other wing scoldingly. "Don't listen to that nuisance. You just need to take your time."

"Take my time?" Louise griped. "You've been trying to teach me magic my whole life, and all I can do is this."

With that, she tapped the branch she was sitting on with a slender purple finger. Instantly, all the leaves fell off, only to be replaced a second later by fresh white blossoms. Her mother chirped with demure delight.

"That's still very impressive."

"Yeah, when I was little," she whined. "I'm almost fourteen now."

"Trust me, Lulu, that's still little." She hopped from her branch to curl up in Louise's lap. Warmed by the sun, her feathers felt like gray silk. "It's better that you take your time. There's no simple path to becoming a Druid, and some bad things can happen when you rush the Craft. Remember what happened last time you tried to take a shortcut?"

"Don't talk about me behind my spine," a soggy voice growled.

There was a sound like falling droplets, as an absolutely drenched book floated up to the branch the two women were reclining on. Suddenly outlined in sickly green light, it shook in midair, sending a spray of water across the two women as it twisted like a wet dog. Louise yelped and her mother took flight.

"As if to prove a point," she sniffed, landing on a higher branch and flapping herself dry. "Don't you have something better to do today, book?"

"Sure, lemme check," he said snottily, thumbing through his own pages. "Lemme open my little daily planner here. My calendar. My freakin' Rolodex. Oh, yeah, there's nothing. I do nothing, hear me? Not until the blue-eyed, two-horned, teenage purple squirrel deleter here decides to make good on our pact and cast out some goddamned magic."

"Rolodex?" Louise muttered, before shaking her head. "I already told you, Tomeas, our pact won't help here. I wasn't TRYING to kill it."

"HA." One of Tomeas' open pages dog-eared at the corner, pointing down to the smoking divot in the forest floor. "But you're really good at it. So use me to take control! Grill some critters on purpose, instead of by accident! Hell, you already promised your soul to... whatever name you fruits call Satan, so why not use it to your advantage?"

"I was ten!"

"She was ten!"

"Boo hoo, she was ten, book," said Tomeas, ignoring the women's outbursts as he bobbed like a cork in thin air. "Boo hoo, you're so mean, book. 'Scuse me for trying to entertain myself. Being a Tiefling's textbook ain't exactly as stimulating as being an imp. I had a pretty sweet life then, y'know. Taking souls and banging succubi. Succubis. Succubuses."

"Succubussies?" offered Louise, earning a scowl and a wing to the back of the head from the same source.

"Language."

"She can say whatever she wants, feathers." Tomeas abruptly jerked himself open, his pages centering on a swirling pentagram. "HERE'S the spell you should be learning, Lucy, not this hippie-dippie talk to animals crap. Not many animals worth talking to anyways," he said, in a tone that implied a sidelong gaze at her mother.

"Burnt...burnt hands?" Louise read slowly, resting her palm on her cheek as she read dark words in a darker language. She wasn't quite sure how she understood the script, but she did all the same, her mind drinking the looping text from Tomeas' pages like hot sand drank water.

"Close," he said, his voice quieter than usual as Louise read him. "Burning hands. I tell you kid, that's a real good one. Just read those words aloud-"

"Enough!"

Razor sharp talons closed around Tomeas, snapping his cover shut. Muffled protests came from between his pages, as Louise's mother flung him into the air, sending him sailing back into the brook in a swearing parabola. The owl angrily beat her wings as she lofted next to her daughter.

"Absolutely not, Louise," she chirped furiously, her wingtips cradled either side of Louise's head. "Absolutely not. No Infernal spells while you're living in my grove."

Louise batted the wings away from her cheeks. "I wasn't going to do anything bad, I just wanted to try-"

"Promise me."

"Okay. I promise, mom," Louise said, in the eye-rolling tone she always took when she was being fussed over.

"Good. Good, okay." The panic left her mother's voice slowly. "I just want you to be safe, Lulu." A cheeky smile spread into her voice, where fear was a moment ago.

"Lulu loops."

Louise stiffened. "Ohmygods, mom. Please don't."

"Oh, when you were younger, you used to laugh so much when I said that," the owl chuckled, her beak clicking joyfully. "Lulu loops, and you'd be rolling on the floor for hours. Lulu loops."

"GODS, just leave me alone, mom! I'm gonna go for a walk!"

"Lulu loops!"

Letting out a groan that would put a wildebeest to shame, Louise fled as fast as she could, scampering down the old oak and flouncing off into a nearby meadow. Her mother watched her the whole way. Only when her daughter was fully swallowed by the golden grass did she finally exhale, like holding her breath would somehow make the old memories stay with her longer.

She was readying herself to fly when the sound of dripping water and muted swearing pricked her ears. The book was back, and seemingly too busy muttering angrily to notice Louise's absence. He wrung himself out again.

"You throw me in the drink one more time, lady, you're gonna pay."

"Oh, am I?"

"Goddamn right you are. For a full rebinding, nothing less. I'm talking frontispiece, gilding... hey, where's the kid?"

"Somewhere," her mother said curtly. "Where are your hands, legs, and tastebuds?"

"Jesus, cease fire," said the book, a bit taken aback. "No need to get personal." The capricious bend returned to his voice. "I just wanted to talk to your fake daughter about her crap magic."

"Fake?" Cold fury filled her voice.

"Cindy. C'mon. You're trying to tell me you shot a full-sized baby out from between those country style drumsticks? Yeah, fake daughter. Where'd you get her, a basket in the river? The flea market? Box of cereal?"

"Go to hell," Sinéad scowled, bristling at the butchering of her name.

"Already been, doll, and it's miles better than this dump." His pages twisted into an origami grin. "Bet the kid's gonna like it too."

With that, and as insulting a gesture a book could make, he flung himself from the branch. Hitting the ground, he bounced once, twice, and on the third time, he hovered, kicking up leaves and rustling twigs as he sped away. Sped was a generous description. He made it about twenty feet before Sinéad swooped down in front of him.

"What, you want the last word or something?" Tomeas said, as the owl looked at him with undisguised contempt. "'Cause I can keep going."

"Please do." In a step, she was close enough to whisper, her smooth accent dripping with promised pain. "And when you reconstitute, tell Louise that dinner is in an hour."

The book whimpered. "Please don't."

For the second time in a day, the grove was split was an earth-shattering boom. Louise, still running through the meadow, whirled around just in time to watch a bank of crackling storm clouds roll away into nothingness. Resting her hands on her narrow hips, she started counting.

"One hippogriff. Two hippogriff. Three hippogriff."

She was at eight hippogriff when the smell of sulfur tweaked her nose. The grass in front of her suddenly singed to a crisp, as a flaming sphere expanded in midair. A still-steaming Tomeas fell out of the Infernal portal with a wheeze.

"Eight seconds," Louise chirped.

"Year and a half," the book grumbled back. "And dinner is still in an hour."

"Are you feeling alright, Lulu? You're barely eating anything."

It was an odd family that had gathered under a tree for dinner that night. A gangly teenage girl with purple skin, goat horns, and a forked tongue was sitting at the head of the table, with a large owl to her right, a larger book to her left, and her head scraping the low earth ceiling. The table, a massive stump that time had polished to a mirror shine, was dressed only with simple wooden dishes. Each had a single red berry on them. Louise smushed hers around with a spoon.

"I'm just not hungry, mom."

"You barely even touched your Goodberry," the owl crooned softly. "Do you want me to create something else?"

The book opened like a mouth, the pages curling into mocking lips. "Yeah, maybe she wants some barbeque squirrel," it rasped, the voice coming from somewhere deep inside. "I know I want some meat. Something rare. Bloody. Hell, even still moving, I'm not picky."

Louise ignored the book. "Just soup or something, thanks."

"Soup it is, dear." The owl hopped from her stool and walked deeper into the burrow, her claws clicking on the still-living wood floor. "I'll be back in a minute. Behave yourself, Tomeas."

"Always do," the book said, his pages wrinkling innocently.

There was a heavy, if muffled, sigh from behind a curtain of clay beads. "No. No, you don't."

With that, Louise and the book were left staring at each other across the table. Well, Louise assumed he was staring at her. It was hard to tell without any eyes. Though it would be hard to tell even if it was a person sitting across from her; the burrow was dim, lit only by a crackling hearth and gem-toned globes of magical fairy fire. Both sources sent flickering shadows across the intricately carved walls. Louise watched them dance. A wheezing noise brought her back to reality, as the book heaved himself onto the table.

"How's the day been, kid?"

"You were there," Louise said dejectedly. Her Goodberry was now a stringy pulp. "Not great."

"That's an understatement." Tomeas scooped closer, pushing aside wooden cups of cider and sending a fork clattering to the ground. "So, I wanted to talk to you. Talk to you about your magic."

"Oh, Gods, not again-"

"No no no, it's different this time," the book said, raising his cover defensively. "No Infernal spells, I promise. Look at me, I'm not even making jokes, that's how serious I am."

Louise leaned back cautiously, sitting deeper in the too-small chair she'd sat in since she was three. Her tail poked through a hastily added hole in the back. "Alright, but no funny business."

"Trust me, this is no funny, all business. I think I know why you're stalling out with your Druidcraft."

"Really?"

"Yeah. The Big Purple."

Unconsciously, Louise's hand went to her forehead. Rather, what came out of her forehead; the Big Purple was what she had taken to calling her transformation. Tieflings weren't born, they were made, the excruciating way that Archdevils marked the holders of their pacts. Even the unwilling ones. Especially the unwilling ones. With a shudder, Louise remembered the fibrous sound inside her skull as she grew horns, and how her mother's healing magic did nothing to soothe the pain. She'd always suspected something changed beyond her appearance that day.

"Mom said that wouldn't affect anything," she chose to say instead, the same thing she repeated to herself whenever she started to worry. "She says the Old Gods don't care how you look, and that it's more about the rituals, and how you align yourself."

"Yeah, she's lying to make you feel better," Tomeas said flatly. "Way I see it, you're Satan's turf now, and he doesn't like the Old Gods muscling in. Thank about it - when was the last time you cast a Druidic spell, other than that blossoming crap?"

"Uhm...just before my tenth birthday. I got some lights to dance in my hand."

"And what happened on your tenth birthday?"

Louise's eyes fell, and she said nothing.

"Bingo."

Louise put her chin on the table, burying her head between her folded arms. "So it's gonna be like this until I die?" she said.

"Nah," said Tomeas simply. "After you die too. You see a lot of Tieflings in Hell. Granted, they run the place, but..." Louise heard his pages crumple. "Well, at least you have me, kid. You're gonna need a lot more than the Craft down there."

"But I don't want to go to Hell," Louise said miserably. "I wish I'd never signed that stupid pact."

"Nickel for every time I heard that. Hey, if it's any consolation, kid, I wish I'd never offered it to you." Tomeas fell back into his seat, lying still in front of his empty plate and his dry cup. "My boss told me it would be a John Hancock now, share a little power with you, and a free soul when you croaked. I didn't think I was gonna get morocco bound. Talk about a raw deal, Jesus."

Louise sat up curiously. "What does that last thing mean? You say it all the time."

"Course she asks ME," the book mumbled. "You, uh... shouldn't say it. It's a guy's name, back where I came from. Good guy. "

"Where you came from? You mean Hell?"

"I said good guy."

"Earth?"

The book fell quiet, and Louise knew better than to keep asking.

The silence didn't lift until the bead curtain at the edge of the room clattered, and Louise's mother came walking in, a plate of steaming food levitating behind her. She gave Tomeas a suspicious glance as she took a fluttering hop onto her stool.

"What were you two talking about?" she asked politely, though her eyes were narrowed.

"Doom and gloom," he grunted. "Enjoy your Campbells, kid." His cover rasped along the hardwood floor as he dragged himself from the room.

The plate coasted to a gentle stop in front of Louise. The familiar smell of beans and mushrooms came up in thin stream from her soup, filling her head with a memory from every time she'd eaten it. After she lost her first tooth. After she'd fallen from the groves tallest tree, then again when she fell from the second tallest tree. After her transformation, when all she could do was lie in bed and try to fall asleep against the fever.

"Is it tasty, Lulu?"

She looked up to see her mother staring at her expectantly. Knowing the answer before she even took a sip, she did anyways. It tasted like it always tasted. Okay. Not stellar, but as magically conjured food went, it was certainly more stimulating than enchanted mistletoe.

"As tasty as the last time," she said honestly, but without much enthusiasm.

With a satisfied noise, her mother went back to pecking at her meal. But her eyes never left Louise, even when she dipped her beak into a thimble-sized cup of hard cider. Louise paused, her spoon halfway to her mouth. She knew when her mother was holding back a question. The sound of cicadas from outside became noticeable. Then prominent. Then unbearable.

"So, doom and gloom?" There it was.

"Nothing like that, mom. Tomeas and I were just talking about my magic."

"Please tell me you're not planning on reading him more."

"No, mom." Dropping her spoon, Louise suddenly pushed away the half-empty plate of soup. "Actually, I am. And I've already read him cover to cover, three times over. Why don't you want me to cast his spells? At least I can do those."

Though she didn't have a nose, her mother sighed through her nose all the same, the air whistling from her beak in an annoyed whisper. "I've told you a thousand times why, Lulu. Look what he did to you."

"What's he going to do, make it so I DOUBLE can't learn the Craft? Make me orange this time?"

Her mother paused. "Oh. That," she said, her feathers slowly expanding. "The Old Gods don't care what you look like-

"Yeah, I know, rituals, alignment," Louise interrupted, a hot lump of anger forming in her throat. "I've heard it before. Jesus, Mom, can you just tell me what's wrong with me?"

"What did you just say?" Her voice was cold. "Your 'problem' is that you've been talking to the book again. There's nothing wrong with you. I was a slow learner at your age, too."

Louise couldn't take it any longer. She jumped to her feet, jolting the dishes on the table, her horns knocking a sprinkling of dirt from the root-laced ceiling. A puddle of soup formed under the table as she paced around it.

"Okay, fine! So when you were my age you practiced the Craft every single day?"

"Of course, dear, but-"

"And you had a wonderful teacher that you respected, trusted, and loved?"

"Oh, Lulu-"

"And you trained with her for four years straight?"

"Louise-"

"So you worked with your favorite person in the world for every day of your life, trying to do the only thing you've ever wanted to do." A film of tears stung at her eyes. "And after four years you didn't see any progress?"

Her mother didn't bother lying. Even if she had, her eyes would have betrayed her. "I don't know. I don't know what's wrong, Louise."

Her voice was thick. "I'm what's wrong."

With that, she ran out of the dining room, the bead curtain clattering mockingly behind her as she left.

Late that night, long after Louise had climbed the spiral stairs to the top of the tree, locked her bedroom door, and spilled every tear she had, her mother sat at the table. The hearth burned down to cool ash and she sat at the table. The globes of fairy fire dimmed and still, she sat. The light of the moon illuminated a fieldmouse, scurrying around the bowl of spilled soup, and she moved.

The mouse locked eyes with her and froze. Sinéad stepped down from her stool, and like no other owl would ever be able to do, walked right up to. It trembled until she reached out a wing. With a loving stroke, its fears melted away. Sinéad leaned down close enough to hear the mouse's quick little breaths. Her eyes pulsed a soothing blue.

"I need you to be my messenger, little one."

Its voice was a breathy whisper. "Yes, Druidess of Bhraonáin."

"Carry my thoughts to the Druid of Grove Kéthmuch."

Chapter 2

Louise woke up to the sound of birds.

Specifically, a singular bird. And specifically, the sound of that singular bird roosting on her head.

"Mom?" she slurred.

What definitely wasn't her mother responded by screeching into her ear.

Shrieking equally as loud, Louise leapt from her bed, sending her handspun sheets flying in every direction. A magnificent, white-plumed kestrel flailed into the air. Oak trees aren't renowned for their floor space, and in Louise's half-cramped half-cozy room, it became a spastic, feathered missile, bouncing off of shelves and bits and bobs as it careened about the place. Nothing was left untouched. Unfortunately, this included the book. He had time to regret sleeping on the highest shelf in the room one the way down, as he teetered out of his "penthouse" and onto Louise's head with a meaty thwap.

The pair hit the ground hard. Struggling to get upright, Louise tried to push Tomeas off of her, only to hear him cry out.

"My ass!"

Something felt stuck.

There was another screech from the kestrel as it dived. Louise dropped to the floor and Tomeas went with her, his rear cover impaled on her pointy little fledgling horns. Scrambling on her hands and knees, she made it to her window, an enormous knot hole with loosely hanging shutters. She pulled them wider and gestured wildly out the window.

"Over here! C'mon, buddy, fly away home!"

"No use, it's out for blood!" Tomeas yelped, flapping around in pain. "We gotta kill it!"

It was like he was glued to her head. Louise stumbled around drunkenly, her head pulled this way and that by Tomeas' thrashing. "I'm not going to kill a helpless animal!"

"You call that thing helpless?!" The book shouted hysterically as the kestrel strafed him.

"If I can just-" The bird cut Louise off mid-sentence, as it grabbed one of her braids and almost ripped it off.

"Ow! What spell?!"

"POISON SPRAY, PAGE THREE THOUSAND EIGHTY SEVEN, PRONTO, KID, PRONTO!"

Out of options and patience, Louise spun around and kneeled, her hands pulling Tomeas' cover open, the top of her head pointing straight at the unlucky kestrel. As she touched the book, a familiar, intoxicating tingle wicked up through her fingertips, and her eyes throbbled a sickly green. Then, she knew the words. She inhaled air, and exhaled Infernal.

"MARANAX INFIRMUX!"

Flexing like a massive lung, the book expelled a seething, tracing jet of translucent gas from deep within its pages, the smell of almonds and burnt metal filling the air as it raced forward. It slammed into the kestrel like a fist. The bird had time to let out a final, choked screech, before it dropped from mid-air like a rock, bouncing off the floor and sliding to a stop at the far wall. Its leg twitched.

Slowly, the green tint in Louise's eyes dissolved, and she stood up, her legs trembling. A breathy laugh bubbled out from her lips. Properly casting a spell for once was exhilarating; exhausting, but exhilarating. Though the laughing stopped when she saw the consequences of her spell. That was less exhilarating.

"Oh Gods," she said in a small voice, prodding the dead kestrel. Its leg twitched again.

Her mourning was interrupted by a pained growl from her forehead. "What did you expect, kid? The spell wasn't called 'Glitter Spray'."

"We need to bury him."

"Fine, you damn vegetarian, bury it. But get your horns out of my ass first."

Louise gave him an exploratory tug. "You're stuck."

"I know I'm stuck, Louise," The book said with menacing slowness. "I can feel the HORNS IN MY ASS."

"Hold still, I gotta get my hands around you."

"I'm holding as still as I can."

"No, you're not. Stop talking, you move when you talk-"

"Ow. Pull left. Your other left. Lucy, pull sideways and left. Ow! Sideways and to the right!"

"No, I gotta pull up. I can feel it, it's almost free- wait, hold on, I have an idea."

"Is that your foot? For god's sake, kid, listen to me, pull upwards and to the left. I mean right!"

"You're not helping!"

"Neither are you! Left and to the right!"

There was a curious peck at the door, and the bickering ended instantly. "Lulu? I was outside, dear, were you shouting?"

Louise froze. Her mother was unique in many ways. Being a living conduit of the Old Gods, being the steward of vast acres of woodland, and being a talking owl were the first that came to mind. But she was a mother first and foremost, and struck with the universally motherly need to demand a clean room. And hers was not. Devastated was a better word; every one of her possessions was strewn about the place, forming an inch-thick layer on the thick growth rings that made up her floor. And she was in no state either, rolling around on the ground, and with one of her cloven hooves up to her forehead in a vain attempt to pry the book loose. Oh, and there was a dead bird in the corner. It twitched once more.

"Nooo," she crooned innocently.

"Smooth," hissed Tomeas.

"I'm coming in." The door's wooden latch jiggled, and Louise's soul left her body.

"I'm naked, mom!" she blurted out, grabbing a fallen shelf to use as a shovel. With fevered speed, she began scooping her scattered belongings into a pile, using her bedclothes as an impromptu sack. "Don't come in, I need to... cover my bits!"

"Is Tomeas in there?" her mother asked. "You know I don't want him watching you change."

"He's asleep!" Louise sang out, picking something off the ground. "Being lazy as usual!"

"Go to hell," he snorted.

"I will when mom kills me. By the way, don't scream."

"Whaddayamean- HOLY."

With a stifled grunt, the book fell to the ground, two neat round holes punched in it from cover to cover. Inky black ichor flowed from them as Tomeas flopped around in silent pain. Louise dropped the walking stick she had used to lever him off her head, and kicked the bundle of stuff under her bed, using her unoccupied hands to throw on a faded green tunic. The latch jiggled again, her mother's invisible, magical hand slowly starting to lift it.

"Are you moving your furniture?" her mother said warily.

"Just trying to find... something. Socks!" Louise tossed her the remains of her broken shelf out the window, and it hit the ground with a splintering crash. "Wow, that's where my socks were. Funny world, haha?"

There was a labored croak from the floor. "Bird."

The door was opening. Her heart leapt, and in a single fluid motion, Louise whipped her tail down, wrapped it around the dead kestrel, and pitched it out the window like a fastball. She spun to a stop just as the door fully opened.

"Surprise, mom," she smiled breathlessly. "Cleaned my room."

She had awaited disappointment. She had foreseen anger. She had really, really, hoped for indifference, but what she never expected was delight, as her mother stepped into her room with a hooting gasp.

"Oh, Lulu, this is wonderful! And I didn't even tell you yet!"

"Well, after our fight last week, I just wanted to do something nice- wait what didn't you tell me yet?" said Louise, the phony smile sliding off her face mid-sentence.

"We're having company over," her mother beamed.

"My collar itches."

"Stop fidgeting with it."

Louise rolled her eyes. "Gods, mom, why didn't I think of that?"

"I know?" her mother replied, equally as acerbic. "It's really quite obvious."

It was too warm a day for this. In the fight between Summer and Autumn, Summer wasn't giving up easy, and for a September afternoon it was positively toasty. It was even toastier if one happened to be wearing full-length, close fitting wool robes, which Louise and her mother both were. They stood outside the massive oak tree that they called home, staring off into the forest as the day crept by. Staring and sweating.

Holding her mother on her left arm, Louise stifled a snigger. "You look silly in clothes."

"The Druid's robes are an outward manifestation of inward spirituality," she said patiently, smoothing the front of hers down with a velvety grey wing. As owls went, she looked quite beautiful today; she had bathed, perfumed herself, plucked any bent feathers, and woven a flower crown for the occasion. "The wool is undyed, but remains white - that represents purity in our thoughts and diligence in our duties. And the gold knotwork signifies the Craft."

"You still look silly."

She sighed. "I know, dear."

A bead of sweat crept down Louise's back, and she reached her tail up under her hem to scratch it away. She fluttered her lips in boredom.

"I wish Tomeas was here."

"I count the Druid of Kéthmuch among my closest friends," her mother responded, "A man I care deeply for, who I haven't seen for many years, and who was travelled a great way to see us. I don't think that being called "queer" by a devil-worshipping dictionary would make a good greeting. Besides," she added cheekily, "Tomeas doesn't have robes."

"He could wear my pillowcase?" Louise suggested.

"No, dear. It was a rather large stone I tied him to. He's staying in the brook for a while."

Minutes passed. A fat black fly landed on Louise's head, and she swatted it away, knocking one of her braids loose. A plait's worth of flowers spilled onto the ground.

"Mom, it happened again."

"Oh, come on, Lulu, that was less than an hour." There was a feeling like cold water touching Louise's hair, as a pair of invisible, slender hands moved up and down her body, gathering up handfuls of flowers and deftly weaving them back into a long dutch braid. "There. Try and make this one last the rest of the day."

"How do we know if he's even coming today?"

"The trees are speaking," her mother said, her voice taking on an ephemeral quality. "Each leaf whispers about Grove Kéthmuch." Her tone changed. "He also sent me a messenger this morning."

"Raven?"

"No, a kestrel."

Louise looked at the hastily-dug hole hidden in the roots of their home, and wiped some new sweat from her back.

Fortunately, it was at this moment that the forest quieted. It wasn't the fearful quiet that accompanied a hunting predator, or the lazy, disinterested quiet of a cold day; rather, this was a respectful quiet, one that filled the gap in time it created with serene contemplation. The forest on the other side of the meadow stirred. Every tree flexed out of the way like bowing monks. And as Louise watched, her mouth hanging open a bit, a magnificent elk stepped out from the tree line.

Deftly weaving in between tufts of grass and leaping over streams, it crossed the meadow in seconds, all without making a noise. Even when it pulled to a halt a single pace from the shadow of the oak tree, all they could hear was deep, powerful breathing, as its hooves left every dry leaf and twig undisturbed. Liquid blue eyes looked down at the two women before the elk bowed its head.

"I recognize you, Sinéad Druidess, of Grove Bhraonáin, and Louise Ovate, of Grove Bhraonáin. I ask to enter." Its voice was a shockingly deep baritone.

"I recognize you, Barbadh Druid, of Grove Kéthmuch," Louise's mother responded in turn. "And I welcome you."

The elk took a single step forward. Suddenly, the leaves that covered the forest floor leapt into the air, whirling into an orange gale that totally concealed him from view. When at last the leaves fell again, a tall man in a white robe was standing where the elk once was. And he was grinning.

Louise's mother snorted. "Showoff."

"Can you blame me for trying to impress you?" Bending at the waist, the Druid gave her a kiss on each feathered cheek. "It's good to see you well, Sinéad."

"Charmer." Her breast feathers puffed up, her way of blushing. "Not in front of Louise."

"The poor young woman you're using as furniture is your DAUGHTER?"

"The term is 'perch'. Say hello, dear."

She gave him a shy wave. "Hi. I'm Louise."

"What's even the point of having the introduction?" he genially asked the air. "I'm Barbadh. And might I say, you're just as beautiful as your mother. The family resemblance is shocking."

It was schmaltzy, but Louise giggled all the same. She didn't get a lot of jokes in her day-to-day life; her mother liked puns, what Tomeas called jokes were just insults, and the rare travelers and merchants that passed through their grove were more interested in staring googly-eyed at her horns. To hear something new, even from a massive, aggressively ginger man, was refreshing. His forked beard tickled her cheeks as he kissed them.

"It's nice to meet you," Louise said.

"I count myself incredibly lucky. Your mother here hasn't had a fellow Druid in her grove in a very long time."

"The summer solstice," her mother reminisced. "I remember. You, chasing Aoife around like a drunk satyr."

"You, judging us," he said, in the same nostalgic way. "What happened, Sinéad? You used to be so much fun."

"I am fun," she said in a wounded tone. Barbadh burst out laughing when he saw the noiseless, retching face that Louise pulled.

"Two minutes pass and they've formed an alliance," her mother grumbled. "Just for that, dear, go make us some drinks. We need to catch up."

Sinéad hopped to her guest's arm, freeing Louise up to whine about the ethics of slavery as she trudged away. Now alone, she swept a wing forward, gesturing towards the three nested gardens that lay before them.

"After you."

Barbadh strolled through a high arch made of river stones and into the ring of grass. A thousand species of moss, grass, and ferns grew in a low lush carpet, weaving in and around the cobblestone path and cushioning his sandaled feet, every step leaving soft pollen hanging in the air. Passing through another arch, he unmistakably found himself in the ring of flowers. This was Sinéad's second great pride. Every bloom in this ring had been coaxed by the Craft into their full potential, every vivid color displayed in celebration without stealing any of their natural intricacies. It was the forest as the forest wanted, regular and irregular and symmetrical and asymmetrical all at the same time, and a satisfied purring noise came from deep in her chest as they walked through it. The final archway lead to the ring of trees, her home, but she pointed to a waiting and especially plush patch of moss.

Sighing with admiration, Barbadh sank into a cross legged seat. "And you call me a showoff."

"You are," she teased back. "That business with the elk? Louise wasn't impressed either."

His laugh boomed out across the gardens. "Are you certain? Because from my eyes, she was purple with envy. Can I say that?" he asked suddenly, his voice softening. "Is she sensitive about it?"

"Surprisingly not. I doubt anyone who calls their disfigurement "The Big Purple" isn't comfortable with it in some way."

"How did it happen? Your message was... vague."

Sinéad took a deep breath.

"Four years ago in a month. It was her birthday - her tenth birthday. She had been going through something of a lull in her learning, but she tried to put on a display for me, summon a globe of fairy fire. It snuffed and she pitched a fit."

"When she stormed off to her room, I thought I was being a good mother by giving her some distance. When I heard her pacing around, I figured it was her way of dealing with her problems. And when I heard her talking to herself, I didn't hear the second voice."

"By the time..." She took a shuddering breath. "By the time I realized something was wrong I couldn't stop it. A ten-year-old got impatient, and that was enough for an Archdevil to notice."

Minutes passed in silence. The trees front door banged open, and Louise came slouching out, her tail wrapped around an empty bucket.

"Mooom, we're out of waaater," she moaned, shaking the bucket. "And I don't wanna walk to the broook."

Sinéad gestured, her eyes flashed blue, and the air around them grew damp. Beads of condensation formed on their skin as the bucket filled. Louise slouched away again.

"And that's when the problems you mentioned started?" Barbadh prompted gently.

Sinéad stopped staring at the space that Louise had just left. "Yes. Since then, the Old God's magic doesn't touch her. She's invisible to my grove, my animals shy away from her... my spells only partially nourish her, only half mend her wounds. And any time she tries to practice the Craft, it's disastrous."

With a raised wing she pointed to a lilac shrub. Limp and twiggy compared to the majesty of their surroundings, it nonetheless had a prominent position in the garden. "All she can do is make things blossom. That's all she can do," she repeated thickly, the words catching in her chest.

"The very fact," said Barbadh, resting a heavy hand on her shoulders, "That she can still do that much should give you hope. Even if it's a tiny seed of power, the Old Gods are with her in some way. There are still places of power, where the ley lines are thick and the veil is thin, where we could petition them."

"Whitehenge." Even spoken in a worried tone, the word reverberated throughout the grove like music. "She's too young for her pilgrimage."

"We weren't much older when we made ours."

"Surely she could wait another year."

"And prolong her grief? If it's as serious as you say, we leave within the next day. At my pace we would still reach Whitehenge in time for the autumnal equinox."

"That's... a rather short notice. But you're kind to come with me-"

"No, Sinéad. Instead of you."

Her heart fell.

"You know as well as I do that a grove must always be tended. My wife can tend to grove Kéthmuch, while I take my son and Louise on their pilgrimage, but you are irreplaceable in these woods."

"You have a son?" Sinéad asked, her head spinning. "You have a WIFE?"

"Eventually Aoife stopped running," Barbadh replied with a sad smile. "You've been quiet for a long time, Sinéad. Some of the groves tried to reach out to you, after Calum-" He stopped himself too late.

Suddenly, it didn't seem so warm. The wind changed as Sinéad looked out across her grove. When she finally spoke, her voice was as thin and as soft as cotton thread. "I had my reasons," she said, "For being quiet." She stared at one of her wings, flexing it imperceptibly. "I'd sooner see my grove burned to ashes than see any harm come to her. See her safely to Whitehenge, Barbadh."

The Druid nodded. "She's lucky to have come to you, Sinéad."

She almost confessed on the spot.

The groaning began again as the front door opened. Louise put a platter down on the blanket, loaded with forest fruits and hot tumblers of tea, and stood over the Druids with a mulish grin.

"Here's your drinks, mom. Maybe now you'll love me. For once."

"Sit down, Louise," she chose to say, instead of screaming. "We need to have a talk."

Louise was already awake before the birds started singing.

It wasn't so much waking, when she finally got out of bed, as it was declaring that sleep was hopeless. It had only come to her in shaky patches that night, and the shaking continued as she crept through the tree. Past her room, the living-wood walls decorated with ochre handprints, finger paintings, and more recent charcoal sketches. Onto the spiral stairs she used to roll pebbles down. To the kitchen, where the smells of last night's dinner still lingered, and her pack was laid out on the table.

She preferred being woken up by the kestrel.

Trying to occupy herself with fixing breakfast, she didn't notice a stagger step thump-thumping approaching from the sitting room. Her mouthful of dried fruit went everywhere as a coarse voice rang out right behind her.

"The hell you doing up so early?"

If books had hands and hips, Tomeas would have the one on the other. Dragging himself closer, he levitated into a chair with his usual mist of green magic, steepling his pages as he waited for an answer. The holes in his cover had sealed shut, leaking black goo from angry red scabs.

"Didn't you hear?"

"Sound doesn't travel too well through water, kid," he snorted. "I just dragged myself out of the brook a couple hours ago. Was drying myself by the fire. Who's the queer on our lawn?"

"Barbadh Kéthmuch," Louise answered sourly. "He's a Druid like mom. I'm going on some stupid pilgrimage, and mom has to stay at the grove for some stupid reason, and him and his big stupid beard are going to be coming with me."

Tomeas curled up in glee. "You seem to be handling it well. Gotta say, kid, it'll be fun having a new hippie to harass. Mommy dearest was getting used to me. I'm thinking... maybe I'll start smoking. Or dirty limericks--"

"Can I ask you a favor, Tomeas?"

He stopped mid-plotting. "All I do for you is favors," he rasped. "What, whaddaya need?"

"Can you stay with mom while I'm gone?"

Sudden laughter burst from between his pages. Louise sat down across from him as he laughed, tearing a chunk from a leathery ring of dried apple. She stared straight ahead, the dark circles under her eyes standing out proud as the book petered out, hiccupping and snorting as he finished.

"Oh, okay, whew. Lemme just put aside the fact she hates me," Tomeas countered, "To ask you, why would you ever want me gone? You'd be giving up your only source of magic, right before you went on your little hero's journey, and last I checked your Gods still hated you. Give me one, and I mean one, good reason I shouldn't come with you."

"Because..."

"C'mon, kid, tick tock. One reason."

Louise ran her fingers through her hair, playing with a strand as she looked down at the table. "Because... I don't know, Tomeas. Because even though I want my magic, I don't want mom to be alone, either. Because I'm the only person she had out here, and you're the only person that knows her better than me. And maybe you'd be bad company, but maybe bad company is better than no company at all."

Tomeas was silent as Louise finished her breakfast. And as she laced her sandals up. And as she tied her pack tight to her back. Only when she put a hand on the front doorknob did he finally speak up, unusually quiet at first.

"Subclause theta dash fifty-nine and a half."

"What?"

"C'mere."

As Louise walked up to the book, he opened his pages, invisibly thumbing through the seemingly infinite quantity fast enough to make a breeze. Louise squinted against the warm, sulphur-scented air coming from the book, and in the split second she was blinking, he turned to the page that couldn't be turned to. The first page.

All his other pages were magical; they had swirling diagrams of interlocked pentagrams, poems by mad liches on the nature of pain, and profane chants written out in follow-the-bouncing-ball singalong form. But this one was relatively normal. Miniscule, unmoving words, on yellowed, unmoving paper. The only thing that separated it from a mundane tax form was a little girl's shaky signature, written in blood at the bottom of the page.

"Read this."

"What?" Louise squinted with all her might; the text was practically microscopic.

"Subclause theta dash fifty-nine and a half," the book read, his voice gradually getting manic as he combed through the hellish legalese, "States that in the event that a contractee is satisfied with their level of Infernal power and wishes to continue using our service, but the contractor is unable to physically be present for the transfer for a given time, this contract authorizes a lump sum transfer of arcane energy commensurate to the expected time away from the contractee, in accordance with their level of damnation!"

"...What?"

"This!"

The book burst into flames.

From deep inside the swirling green flames that engulfed him, phrases suddenly stood out proud, spelled out in Infernal script as they danced into Louise's mind. Burning Hands. Hellish Rebuke. Charm. Command. A dozen more joined them, their pages dissolving into fire and wicking into Louise's mind. Suddenly dizzy, she stumbled into a chair as Tomeas whipped his cover closed, extinguishing the fire. He was thinner, now, and smoking.

"Ohh," she moaned, her hands on her temples. It felt like she was electrically charged, like there was a field of static suffusing every nerve and muscle in her thin body. Her fingers trembled. Every heartbeat felt like a lightning strike. "I feel... really, really good."

"Glad one of us does." The book's voice was feeble. "Call it a down payment. That's a decent chunk of my power I just gave you. I'm gonna reconstitute if you blow through it all, kid, so try to have a little moderation. Make it last."

"You're telling me to have moderation?"

"Strange times." He spit out some ash. "You take that and go on your little hippie getaway. I'll keep your ma company. But do me a favor. Give that ginger hell for me-"

He jerked to a stop, as Louise wrapped him up in a hug.

It was damp outside, and Louise pulled her thick green shawl close as she stepped into the pre-morning gray. Too early for birds, and too late for crickets, the gardens were quiet as she slipped through them. From the bushes of flowers that her mother had so expertly tended, thorns pricked at her shawl, pulling at the seams like they were trying to keep her in place. It almost worked. Walking just past the garden arch, Louise saw her mother standing still in a circle of pebbles, her head bowed and Barbadh standing by her side. The red-bearded druid gave her a wave as she approached, and she gave him a sour look in turn.

"Good morning, Louise," he said cheerfully. "Sleep well?"

"No."

"Ah." To his credit, his smile barely deflated. "Excited to go on your pilgrimage?"

"No."

"So, you're not the least bit interested in seeing the Whitehenge, nexus of every ley line, and artifact of the Druids for a dozen centuries?"

"No."

"Ah."

Neither of them said anything else, Louise not wanting to speak to the big red oaf, and Barbadh not wanting to provoke the surly purple lass. Both of them gave silent thanks when Sinéad stirred. Raising her wings, she let out a low, melodious note from her beak, and before their eyes a swirling orb of clouds appeared. Its surface slowly dissolved away to reveal bright sunlight, before blinking out of existence.

"At least the weather will clear up," she said, fluttering in for a perch on Barbadh's arm. "Good morning, Lulu. Sleep well?"

Reaching her arms around, Louise held her tight. "Yes, mom." She looked over her shoulder mid-hug to glare daggers at Barbadh. This accomplished nothing. But it did make her feel better about leaving, and she wasn't about to break her promise to Tomeas.

"Well," her mother said, releasing the hug after slightly too long. "I already packed for you. And we went over the journey last night - do you remember the route?"

"First to Grove Kéthmuch by way of the Goldenwood," Louise recited. "Then, follow the northern fork of what's-its-name river until you reach a ferry. From there we take the ferry across a lake. Lakes? Either way, we cross that, then we're in the Glens, and we travel through there until we find the Old Roads. After that, we... walk for a way. Turning occasionally."

"That's... roughly correct. But please, listen to Barbadh. I trust him, so you should too. Okay?"

"I will, mom," she said. I absolutely won't, mom, she thought.

"So."

"So."

A quiet breeze stirred through the grove's flowers, and a contemplative pause lay heavy over the group.

This is it. All that's left to do is say..." Sinéad's beak trembled a little, her breast feathers puffing up. "The G word."

"Yep," Louise said, desperately trying to think of something meaningful to say. "Yep, yep, yep." Dammit.

"I'll see you soon, Lulu. It's only three weeks to the solstice. Twenty-one days. Five hundred and four hours."

"Mom... we have to return, too. It's twice that."

"Oh my."

The two women went quiet again, staring at each other in silence. They remained in place until Barbadh softly cleared his throat.

"We really should be off, Sinéad."

She didn't break eye contact. "We're not done talking."

Pink threads of cloud would start to lace the sky before they next spoke.

"You know, mom," said Louise quietly, fiddling with the tip of her tail. "We don't have to say the G word. We can just say... bye."

"I see. Well, okay. Bye bye, Lulu. I love you."

"Bye, mom. Love you."

Another moment of silence passed.

"Did it work?"

"No, dear."

Dawn arrived before they finally said goodbye.

Epilogue

For the first time since becoming a book, Tomeas didn't want to drink. In fact, Sinéad might have put him off it for life.

When she'd first gotten back to the house, she was as close to crying as an owl could be. Seeing as they lacked tear ducts, this was not close in the slightest. But she could still sob with the best of them. And despite the initial string of insults, questions, and demands she'd hurled at Tomeas on finding out he was still in her house, she had still started spilling out a sobbing recount of every single moment of Louise's life the minute he offered to hear her problems. She had also spilled more than a few drops of cider down her beak in the process.

"There... there's this one time, book, where she showed me... a shnail. Little one." Sinéad hiccupped, and her magical hand wobbled, sending the contents of her tiny cup onto the floor. "Godsdammit. Wait, you know what a shnail is, right? Fellows with the... thing. Shwirlygig. On their butts."

"Shells?" That was Tomeas' eleventh word of the evening. Sinéad was more than capable of carrying the "conversation" on her own.

"That's the one!" she hooted, clapping her wings together in glee. "Shells! So this shnail has the prettiest shell I've ever seen! So I tell Lulu, I tell her, 'That shnail has the prettiest shell I've ever seen'. And you know what she says back?"

"No." Twelve.

"Lulu says, 'Not as pretty as you, mom.' Isn't that... wonderful? Isn't she the best? Didn't she grow up so fast, and now she's gone and I'm alone ohmygods," She said, tumbling into an ugly sob at whiplash speeds.

Tomeas sighed. "You gonna dry out anytime soon, Cindy? It's almost midnight, and you've had almost..." He looked deep into the ceramic jug and snorted. "An ounce and a half. Jesus, how much do you weigh?"

"More than a chicken," she slurred. "But less... than a goose. And I'm not fat, it's my winter down. I get chilly. I get chilly all the time, because being an owl is... crap. It's crap, book. I miss being a woman."

This came as a mild surprise to him. "Thought you were born an owl. Magic'd yourself to speak or something."

"Nope. Nope, nope, all woman. Black hair. Like a raven. And beautiful. Like your girlfriend."

The book bristled. "Alright, time for bed."

"Aren't you gonna introduce me first?"

"To WHO, you goddamn drunk?"

Sinéad pointed behind him with a wavering wingtip, her eyes sliding in and out of focus. "To your girlfriend."

A horrible chill suddenly ran down his spine. It wasn't almost midnight. It WAS midnight. The moon was at its peak, and with a sound like a gunshot, a slender pair of fingers behind him snapped.

"CRUDUXCRUO."

Sinéad collapsed into a snoring heap, and those same slender, impossibly well-groomed fingers began drumming on Tomeas' front cover. He tried to turn around, only to hiss in sudden pain. The nails grew sharp and pierced him. Bucking around to try and get himself free, he froze as a pair of stark red lips leaned down into his narrow slit of vision, and whispered.

"Hey there, Tommy. Make any mistakes recently?"

"Not beating you like a goddamn carpet when I had hands," he growled. "Whaddayawant, Caroline?"

She wasn't speaking the smooth, rolling language that Louise and her mother called Common; this was earthly English, plain and simple, with a sweet Georgia accent that had come straight from a plantation house. "What I want," she purred, "Is what our Dark Lord wants. And a little reminder, because you've been busy tryin' to be the cool uncle for the past four years? That's what you want, too."

Her voice grew sharp, and crystals of frost spread from her fingertips onto his cover. "So when I tell you that Mephistopheles wants that brats soul, you'd better believe that you really, REALLY want him to get that soul."

The book gasped in pain, his speech becoming labored as his pages froze together. "He'll- get his damn soul- in time."

"Not if she makes it to Whitehenge," she spat. "She makes it there, the pact is severed, and you... well. She won't have much need of you after that. Jesus, Tommy, doesn't gettin' outplayed like that just burn? Giving half your power to a little girl, then she turns around and uses it to renege? I knew you were bad at this, but even being an imp was too much for you."

He couldn't speak any more. Only a panting, excruciating noise came from inside the book, as a beard of icicles formed at the edges. "Fortunately for you, the Dark Lord has an outstanding offer. You make sure the girl dies before she reaches Whitehenge - and you get your body back."

"Unfortunately for you, hon," she said, enjoying every second of it, "He told me somethin' similar."

With a vicious grin, the woman pulled her nails out from deep inside him, sending a spray of frozen black blood and shredded paper across the floor.

"May the best Devil win," she said, before a flaming sphere opened behind her. Flames seared into her flesh as she stepped into the portal, a dark laugh rising as she was reduced to a windswept pile of ash. A dusty tornado swirled away into the void.

Tomeas coughed, and hacked up a slushy mixture of frost and pitch black snow. Slowly, he hauled himself upright, quivering with pain as he floated over to Sinéad. She was still snoozing peacefully. Slow drips came from her spilled cup.

Drip. Drip. This will be a lot easier if she doesn't wake up.

Drip. Just drop onto her neck. Owls break like any other bird.

Drip. Drip. She'd be bad company on the road.

Drip. But sometimes, bad company is better than no company at all.

Tomeas descended on the helpless woman.

In the early hours of the morning, the mind tends to play tricks on you. So when a fat brown squirrel saw a flying book, hovering a meter off the ground and carrying a drunk owl on its back, speed off to destinations unknown, he didn't give it a second thought. Or a first one, for that matter.