

because darling I'm a nightmare (dressed like a daydream)

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by [Sapphicsarah](#)

Summary

So it's gonna be forever, or it's gonna go down in flames.

Or, five times Mary Wardwell helped Zelda Spellman sleep, and one time she didn't.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

The Dark Lord works in mysterious ways

The world was not getting any smaller, there was just less in it.

Fairies never visited Greendale anymore, and Zelda suspected their remaining numbers were in hiding. Goblins rarely came out of their caves, and the dwarfs had not left the mines in decades. Trolls let just about anyone cross their bridges these days, and Zelda had not seen a unicorn since the 1860's.

She remembers when she was still a child and the last dragon had died. Her carcass had been as big as a hillside, and droves of witches had flocked to it, gathering and scrounging. Dragon's teeth were powerful, and a key ingredient in some of the most ancient spells. Their scales were sharper than steel and did not rust. Their talons were as large as a horse, and the bone marrow was said to give unspeakable knowledge to anyone who drank it. Zelda remembered crying as they picked apart the beast, scattering it to the four winds. Zelda didn't understand why the dragon did not just fly away.

Wake up, she urged it silently. Fly away!

But no dragon ever flew again, and the ash of the last dragonfire fell to the ground like black snow. Prophecies were left to rot, boxes with hidden treasures went unopened, and witches grew old and died.

There were many types of witches. There were bog witches who looked like one would think a bog witch would look like. There were witches of the forests, who lived in houses made out of evil men's bones. There were cunning crones who had little shops in dark alleyways and hunted in the bowels of mortal cities. There were sea hags and necromancers, enchantresses in the valleys, and witches like Zelda who lived at the foot of the mountains.

The visit from Gryla had reminded Zelda of all the things that once were. The image of the other witch, with her wild hair and dark eyes had been a reminder of what could have been. A reminder of what Zelda could be. In some stories, Gryla was a giant. In others she was just a witch with a sad story. Either way, Zelda feared her and the power that lingered long after she had left with the faux Leticia.

Zelda never felt powerful in the church. It was a building built by warlocks and it reeked of stuffy air and prayers whispered by powerless men as they waited for power to be thrust upon them. The church with its ancient rituals and dead words was a meeting place, a gathering point. But when she was young Zelda had worshiped in the forests. She took to the woods, removed her shoes and walked barefoot amongst the trees. She climbed the rocky mountains and breathed in the thin air.

Magicfolk had no kings, but on the mountain she had felt like a Queen, with twigs in her hair and her dress caked in mud. She was the witch on the mountain and she loved being alone on the mountain, high above where all the world looked small and impossibly far away. How far she had come since being a child, staring into the dead dragon's glassy eye.

Death was an inevitability that haunted Zelda. Some witches lived for a thousand years, and some only for a few short centuries. They rarely died of old age. Some witches even saw their deaths in dreams, long before they passed. Most died by violence, or by a spell gone wrong, or by the hands of their suspicious neighbors. Some drowned at sea, some were poisoned by their enemies, and some dreamed of a long line of torches slithering up the hillside on its way to burn down a witch house at the forest fence.

Zelda had never dreamed her death. One dream followed her though, and it came back after Leticia was gone. Zelda dreamed of a clearing of white birches covered in a silent cloak of snow. It was the clear, crystal white aftermath of a winter storm that haunted her. In the dream, the sun was always rising, and the ground sparkled as bright red blood dripped down her fingertips.

She had dreamed of her parents as they grew old and withered. They had wandered into the woods, like all ancient beings, and had stood amongst the trees. Their stillness changed them, and moss grew on their hands and feet, until they became trees too. She dreamed of her Aunt Constance whose hands had become stiff and wrinkled with age, and watched those hands curl into fists when she couldn't remember even the simplest of spells. Zelda slept and saw Constance walk down to the river to become a part of the current that drifted all the way out to sea. Years later, she saw Edward plunging into the same sea in a metal cage, and she dreamed of Diana holding Edward's hand until the waters tore them apart. She dreamed of Vinegar Tom, old and feeble and unable to outrun the neighbor's car as it slipped and careened on black ice.

Sabrina was a full witch now that she had signed The Book of the Beast, but she had been mortal, and part of her was mortal yet. She was full of teenage angst and hunger, and she ached for a better world. She was so young, and Hilda and Zelda had made sure she would want for nothing. But Sabrina's duality made her different to other Spellmans, and Zelda knew that despite the long life ahead of her, Sabrina would grow old and die long before her aunts ever did.

Zelda hoped to never dream of Hilda.

The dreaming made it hard to sleep, but she could always be lulled by the sound of Hilda snoring softly beside her. Before Hilda, it had been an endless parade of faceless people, mortals and witches alike. Lovely, beautiful people, whose names Zelda forgot as soon as she forgot their faces. One had been a devout Catholic, a lady's maid who did not know she served in a house of witches. She slept in the little bed in the corner of Zelda's room, and Zelda slept soundly as the the maid mumbled in her sleep. And then it was a warlock who had thought he would marry her, but Zelda only wanted him for a decade or so.

When Hilda moved out of their shared bedroom it was Leticia, who slumbered often and cried rarely. She was a peaceful babe, and Zelda couldn't help but be bewitched by her little noises, the soft cooing and the giggles of delight. Her little hands were soft as Zelda hummed, and she whispered a silencing spell around the room when the thud of Ambrose's music disturbed their quiet. The peace was shattered as Desmelda spirited Leticia away to a life of safety and seclusion.

Zelda did not sleep for days.

She thought that since the house had others she would be able to drift off, but she had always slept with someone near, someone close by to help her feel safe. But it was hopeless, with Hilda down the hall and Leticia gone.

She tried everything. A calming chamomile tea just before bed, a sleeping draught in her brandy, a purple potion in her hand cream meant to soothe. She lounged in her clawfoot bathtub and marinated in buttermilk as dozens of candles flickered, and eventually went out. And yet, she could not sleep.

She carefully tipped her head back and placed a drop of foxglove on her tongue. And then two drops. And then three. She slept for a few hours, but awoke when Salem scampered down the corridor outside her bedroom. She huffed and threw off the duvet, marching down the stairs to start the day.

Her face was ashen, and the bags under her eyes were growing by the day. Her hair wouldn't stay the way she wanted it, even with a charm to help the curling iron. Her hands shook as she poured her morning tea, and she couldn't focus on the newspaper during breakfast. The words swam together, making a jumbled sea of letters, and she tossed the paper down in defeat and glared at her family instead.

Leticia had been gone a week and she hadn't slept a wink.

She prayed to Satan every night to bring her sleep, sweet dreamless slumber. Only for an hour or two. Anything.

On the eighth night she prayed to Lilith.

"Mother of demons, hear me," Zelda whispered as she kneeled beside her bed, her hands clasped together tightly. "I beg of you to bring me sleep." She bowed her head and closed her eyes. "I am so tired," her voice cracked. Her bones ached, and her head throbbed. She felt as if she was on the verge of a great precipice, teetering over a yawning abyss. She felt as if she was going mad.

Then, a breeze swept through her room, and the warding candle on the windowsill flickered. Someone was at the door.

She heard a dull knock, and Zelda rose quietly, walking passed Sabrina's room and then the spare room- *no, Hilda's room* . She padded down the stairs and pulled her robe tightly around her. It was chilly on the ground floor, and the house creaked as the winter wind howled outside. A storm was brewing.

She opened the door and stepped back as a hooded figure walked across the threshold. The wind swept through behind her and snow drifted along the wood panels of the floor and a few flakes swirled around before settling on Zelda's bare feet. She quickly closed the heavy door to keep out the night and it clicked shut with a finality that seemed to echo in the quiet house.

She turned around to face Mary Wardwell.

"You?" Zelda sputtered in disbelief. "The Dark Lord sent you?"

Miss Wardwell shrugged as she tugged back her hood. "The Dark Lord works in mysterious ways?"

It was a hollow explanation, but beggars can't be choosers, and Zelda was not far off from begging. She was exhausted, and she sighed in resignation as she felt her shoulders droop.

Miss Wardwell hurried over to her and placed both hands on Zelda's waist as she swayed.

"Why did you wait this long Sister Zelda?" Miss Wardwell scolded lightly. "I could have come sooner, you poor dear."

Zelda shook her head and leaned into the other witch. Her hands were surprisingly warm, having been out in the cold on the journey here, and Zelda wanted to sink into the warmth.

"Come, let's get you to bed," the schoolteacher murmured, and Zelda allowed herself to be led up the stairs, past Hilda's door, past Sabrina's, and down the winding corridor to her own. It should have felt strange, to have Sabrina's teacher in her bedroom, but Zelda couldn't shake the fog that had settled in her brain. Her head was so heavy, and her feet shuffled along. She felt herself slump onto the bed and watched as Miss Wardwell gracefully draped her coat on the back of the chair at Zelda's desk. She kicked off her heels, and turned to look at her.

She must have been a sight, because Miss Wardwell's eyebrows knit together and she hurried over and gently urged her to lie down.

"That's it," she murmured, as she tucked Zelda under the covers. "You'll be asleep in no time."

"What have you brought me?" Zelda asked, as she felt herself sink into the mattress. Her head settled into the soft pillow and she turned to watch the other woman walk around the bed and settle on the other side. Zelda hadn't heard anything, but Miss Wardwell must have whispered a spell sometime since they entered the bedroom, because her bed had grown slightly, and was now large enough to accommodate them both. Miss Wardwell stretched out on top of the duvet and settled beside her. Zelda watched as she gently crossed her ankles and settled her hands on her stomach. The woman looked prim and proper, like she was ready to be buried.

"I haven't brought you anything," Miss Wardwell said, smiling as she caught Zelda staring.

Zelda's brow furrowed. "Nothing? No elixir or incantation?" She loathed how her voice went up in pitch, high and desperate.

"Just little old me," she said, and grinned that grin Zelda hated.

"Fine," Zelda huffed, and turned away to look up at the arched ceiling. Her heart rate was slowing and she felt sleep taunting her, just around the corner. Her eyes slipped shut without her permission and the only sound she could hear was the wind howling, the old house shifting, and Mary Wardwell breathing in and out beside her. Zelda's breath quickly matched it, and she felt her body grow impossibly heavier.

“Just be gone by morning,” Zelda mumbled. “I don’t want my family to know you were here.”

“Don’t worry,” Mary promised softly. “I’ll be gone long before the sun rises.”

“Praise Satan for that,” Zelda whispered as she finally, *finally* drifted off to sleep.

“Praise Satan,” Mary whispered back as she watched Zelda sleep.

They yearned to build the pyres of their enemies

When Zelda awoke the next morning she felt like a new woman. She glanced at the small clock on the wall and realized she'd slept late. It was nearly nine. She carefully removed the duvet, sighing at the stiffness in her legs. Her bare feet came to rest on the cold wooden floor as she sat on the edge of her bed. Her head felt a little better, but sleep still clung to her, and she brought up her fists to rub at her eyes.

Suddenly, she remembered her visitor from last night and turned to look at the space behind her. The other side of the bed was still made and looked unslept in, save for the small indent where Miss Wardwell had rested for a spell. Zelda sighed. Praise Satan for small mercies. The woman was gone.

Zelda made her way downstairs, still in her silk robe, and found herself all alone. Sabrina was already at Baxter High no doubt, and Ambrose was probably at the academy. Hilda was still insisting on working her ridiculous job in that ridiculous shop, but Zelda didn't have the heart to argue about it anymore.

Batibat's release and subsequent terrorizing of the Spellman Household had lingering effects. Zelda had held onto Hilda for so long, and she realized she had taken her sister for granted. She had taken their life together, here in this house, for granted. She had even taken sleep for granted.

In all her years of dreaming other people's deaths, Zelda had never dreamed of Hilda truly dying. She had killed Hilda so many times over the years that they had lost count long before they were even adults. It was her Satan's given right, but Zelda no longer had the stomach for it.

For witches were not immortal. Nor were they invincible. Witches lived and died, but it was their nature to live alone in one place, on the fringe of society, usually in a forest or near mountains, or in a dark wood. The Spellman house was on the edge of the forest, tucked away and lovely. It was old, and the seventh stair creaked and the back door needed mending. The roof leaked in strange places, and the electricity went out far too frequently. The porch was leaning slightly to one side, and Zelda knew they desperately needed to repaint the west side of the house in the summer. The old place was worn and hauntingly beautiful. It was home.

When Hilda had said she was moving out, Zelda's heart had dropped to the floor. And when Hilda had said, "out of this room," Zelda had only felt a little better. The house had been in the family for centuries. The Spellman children had wandered the earth, exploring new places and new flavours, but they always returned. Zelda had returned in the early 40's, when Ambrose had first been sentenced. She had said it was to give him company in his court-appointed solitude, but the mortal war had spread like wildfire across Europe. Nowhere was safe, for mortals or magicfolk. Evil poured out of Germany like poison seeping into the bloodstream, and Zelda had fled like so many others.

Hilda had joined them soon after, when London was bombed and nearly wiped clean off the map. When it was all over, Zelda left again, but she always came back after a year or two. Hilda rarely left Greendale, and Ambrose never left their plot of land.

Edward had been the true traveler, the gifted child, the Chosen One. He heralded in a new age of worship, with his big ideas, and controversial opinions. The Church of Night had never seen anything like it, and Zelda didn't think they ever would again. There was so much of Edward in Sabrina, although she was the spitting image of Diana.

When Sabrina was born, Zelda had been the first one to hold her as she took her first breath. Diana had screamed in agony, and her voice had echoed in the trees. It was a lucky thing, to be born in a forest, and Zelda had brought Sabrina back to the same grove over and over again as she grew up. It was her birthplace, her birthright, and it was where she would be born again on her Dark Baptism.

Zelda and Hilda had taken her into the woods often, and Hilda had held Sabrina's hand as she skipped and gleefully kicked the dead leaves underfoot.

"Listen," Zelda would say to Sabrina, as she looked up at the canopy of trees. "Do you hear that?"

Sabrina would go still and look up too, her eyes wide with wonder.

"It's the sound of wind blowing through tree branches," Zelda murmured.

Sabrina would smile, and look up at her aunts. Zelda couldn't help but smile back.

When Edward and Diana had died there were no gravestones, no monuments. There was only an empty void where they once had been. Zelda tried to take up the space they had left, and tried to be a mother, something she had never really thought of ever becoming. Hilda took to the role naturally, and Zelda- albeit hesitantly, followed her lead.

They took Sabrina deeper and deeper into the forest, where the trees were so tall and thick that they blocked out the sky. The forest floor was filled with flowers, impossibly growing without sunlight. A babbling brook weaved its way through the trees, and bluebells grew along the bank, with foxglove and harebells, daffodils and lilies of the valley. Zelda leaned down into the water to pluck a snowdrop flower, and placed it in the lapel of little Sabrina's jacket.

"It'll bring you luck," she whispered to Sabrina, as if it was a great secret for just the two of them.

Sabrina giggled and ran off to chase a butterfly. Zelda and Hilda picked mushrooms and herbs, and other things not meant for children while Sabrina played, and then they would wander back to the house. It was a peaceful life, quiet. Zelda hated that she was not bored with it by Sabrina's fifth summer. She'd always fancied herself a wanderer, a witch with a restless spirit and a bitter heart. But Greendale had a way of keeping people in it, and Zelda stayed.

“I’ll wait until her Dark Baptism,” she explained to Hilda over and over as the years kept coming. “Satan knows you’ll need help raising that child.”

Hilda rolled her eyes every time, but that had been that, and now Sabrina’s Dark Baptism had come and gone and Zelda was still in Greendale.

...

The greatest trick the magic community ever played was convincing humans they didn’t exist. They were all just fairy tales, told to frighten naughty children. As the children grew older, the power of the stories faded, until they forgot them all together. To most humans, vampires and goblins didn’t exist. There were no monsters under the bed, and there was no such thing as magic. It was as if they were all born into magic, but the magic was taken from humans as they grew up.

Zelda had watched generation after generation of humans who had lived and loved, and had children and died. And as Zelda had done none of these things, she never grew tired of watching them. Humans rarely realized life while they were living it. Their lives were fleeting, over in a dash. They had a handful of birthdays, a few holidays, and then the march of time marched them into the ground.

Witches had little idea of months and years and centuries. The seasons were important, with the high unholy days of worship marking the calendar, and their ritualistic sacrifices indicating the passage of time. But until Sabrina, Zelda had never felt old. Or tired.

Being an Auntie was exhausting, and the emotional labor involved in keeping up with a teenager was not something Zelda had anticipated. Ambrose had had his fair share of angst, but he’d been quite sedate since being confined to the house. Zelda was not prepared for the tears and the screaming matches and the exorcisms. She was not prepared for Miss Wardwell, and all the chaos that seemed to follow her.

She just hadn’t expected the peace of their small life to be disrupted. She hadn’t expected sleepless nights, long after Sabrina was out of her nappies.

Zelda slept for a few nights after Miss Wardwell’s little visit. There were pockets of time, tucked away in the night when Zelda thought she had slept for years. But she would wake with a start as the clock struck three, and she would wander the house until the sun rose.

Hilda noticed, after a few mornings of Zelda making breakfast. There was little to do in the predawn light and Zelda had taken to boiling eggs and brewing tea, toasting Hilda’s french bread, and placing the plates all prettily in a row.

“You alright Zelds?” Hilda had asked the first morning, when she was faced with raspberry jam and butter and cream. There was even sausage on the hob.

“I am perfectly fine, sister.” Zelda dismissed with a huff. “Just thought I’d get an early start.” And then she promptly hid behind her newspaper.

She ignored the looks made between Ambrose and Hilda, and ignored Sabrina as she swanned in with her new hair and all black outfit. The room hummed with untamed magic, as Sabrina sat down and Zelda resisted the urge to light a cigarette. The house had been humming ever since she signed her name, and Zelda hoped it would settle down soon.

“Morning,” Sabrina said with a chipper voice that grated on Zelda’s already exhausted nerves.

“Blessed morning niece,” Hilda chimed back, and Zelda rolled her eyes.

“Did you sleep well?” Hilda asked, as she buttered her toast.

“Like a baby,” Sabrina answered with a smile.

Zelda slammed her newspaper down and went outside to smoke.

That night there were rabbit feet beneath her pillow, no doubt placed there by Hilda. Zelda slept a little better.

...

The thing was, it was probably best that magic was forgotten by most humans. Most humans dismissed their eccentricities, and seemed to explain away the oddities that happened around magicfolk. It was as if there was a veil between them, and the details of witches were fuzzy and faded, a little out of focus. But some humans did not forget. They remembered and changed so that they hated all magicfolk and tried to kill them when they saw them.

Witch hunters were still a threat, and covens provided some much needed protection. Their strategy was as old as the hills; strength in numbers.

Zelda wondered what witches looked like to a witch hunter. A witch hunter to Zelda looked like an angry man, with hatred in his eyes and violence in his hands. The first witch hunter Zelda had killed had been a tall, thin man who had followed her for several city blocks. His face had been angular and harsh, and Zelda had led him into an alley and looked into his cold eyes as she slit his throat. She had watched his blood spread along the cobblestones and she had quickly looked down the dark alleyway. The night was black and London seemed blacker than it had ever been, but the corpse and her were all alone and Zelda had teleported away unseen.

She hadn’t dreamed of that night for an age, but it came howling back and Zelda ached to run to Hilda’s room. She wanted to pound on the door, crawl into her sister’s bed, and pull her close like when they were children. She wondered for a moment if Batibat’s spell had never ended, and if they were still trapped, living their nightmares over and over.

Hilda leaving was a nightmare, but she bore it. A thousand-year life span was nothing if one had nobody to share it with, and Zelda had always thought Hilda would be there when she needed her. Zelda tossed and turned and then gave up after an hour or so. She lit a candle and read her Satanic Bible until morning came and sunlight crept across her bedroom floor.

“I’d like to invite Miss Wardwell for dinner tonight,” Sabrina announced at breakfast.

Zelda nearly choked on her tea.

“Ah, that’s a lovely idea darling,” Hilda said. She glanced over at Zelda. “Isn’t that lovely?”

Zelda smiled tightly and wiped her lips with a napkin.

“I was thinking we could make a pot roast?” Sabrina said. “Something special.”

“For the woman who keeps giving you access to dark magic?” Zelda huffed.

Sabrina rolled her eyes. “For the woman who has helped me through the dark times these past few months.”

Hilda looked across the table at her earnestly. “It hasn’t been easy for any of us, Zelds. And we never did properly thank her for looking after Sabrina all these years.”

“We didn’t even know she was doing that,” Zelda glared. She stood up and took in a deep drag of her cigarette. She leaned against the sink and surveyed her wayward family. A halfway house for witches indeed.

Ambrose grinned at her over his teacup and Hilda smiled as Sabrina pleaded with her eyes. She never could say no to Sabrina. *You always say no to Sabrina*, said Hilda's voice in her head.

“Please Auntie Zee?”

Zelda sighed. “Well, it has been a good while since we had a decent roast.”

Sabrina giggled and jumped up and before Zelda could stop her she was being pulled in for a tight hug. *She is still so young*, Zelda thought.

“Thank you Aunties I’ll invite her at homeroom. I can’t wait!”

And just like that, Sabrina was out the door, Ambrose spirited away to the academy and Hilda chuckled merrily as she started clearing up.

Zelda took in a deep breath. Miss Wardwell was coming to dinner.

...

It wasn’t that Zelda was nervous. On the contrary, she was just a little anxious. She had worked hard throughout the years to convey an image of herself as a kind of pillar of strength for the Spellman family. If Mary Wardwell ridiculed her, or exposed her weakness to her family she would be furious. After all, what was a witch who couldn't sleep without someone next to her?

The last few weeks had been fitful nights, but whatever Miss Wardwell had done had done the trick, at least for a little while. But now Zelda felt herself wanting to walk to the fridge,

look at the Baxter High phone tree, find Miss Wardwell's number and dial it. She wanted to hear her voice, or to have the phone by her ear so that she could listen to the other woman's voice as the sound lulled her to sleep. She had so far resisted such ridiculous urges, but her will was wearing thin.

Of course there was Faustus. He was recently widowed and available, but something in the way he looked at her now left a foul taste in her mouth. His obvious scorn of women and his Herod-like tendencies had broken whatever spell had been over their little dalliance. No, she had no real desire to invite Father Blackwood back into her bed.

And so she brushed her hair, carefully applied her lipstick, and pulled out a black velvet dress she hadn't worn in years. She looked like a witch and felt like a witch, and she closed her eyes when the smell of Hilda's cooking wafted up the stairs from the kitchen below. She heard the front door open, and listened earnestly to the sound of Sabrina welcoming in Miss Wardwell, and decided now was the time to make her entrance. She loved to make an entrance, always was a little dramatic.

She descended the staircase as the rest of the family gathered in the foyer, and she raised her chin when they all looked up at her.

"You look lovely, sister," Hilda said with a proud smile.

Zelda smiled at the compliment, and at the way Miss Wardwell licked her lips at the sight of her.

...

Dinner was a strange affair, for there wasn't really much to talk about. Their lives had been so chaotic that since the solstice, nothing had really happened. Well, other than Miss Wardwell secretly spending the night in Zelda's bed a fortnight ago.

Miss Wardwell gracefully led the conversation, steering the topics to cater to Sabrina's interests. She turned to Ambrose and Hilda often, asking their opinion and leaning in to listen earnestly. She complimented Hilda's cooking, let Salem sit in her lap, and glowed as Zelda watched from the other side of the table. They were sitting quite far apart, but Zelda couldn't quite tear her eyes away.

She'd never noticed how alluring the other woman was. She wasn't a classic beauty by any means, but there was something about her. Once she caught one's eye, it was difficult to turn away. Her nails were painted black, and she had on a red dress that brought out the cold blueness of her eyes. Her hair was perfectly wild yet looked inviting. Zelda wondered if it was as soft as it looked.

Her staring went unnoticed by her little family, who seemed just as bewitched by their guest as Zelda was. So she drank a glass of brandy, and then another, and then another. The room grew warm and heady as Hilda laid the table for dessert, so Zelda excused herself to smoke a cigarette outside.

The moon was glowing, a sharp crescent in the cold winter sky. The snow covered the trees and fields, and the drifts kissed them gently in the night. The white blanket covered the ground up snug, as if the Earth was sleeping until the summer came again. Zelda longed for sleep.

Longing. Perhaps that's what made the banshees scream, as they felled forests and waded through swamps. They longed for death, for sleep, for peace. They yearned to build the pyres of their enemies, yearned to join them in the fire.

Zelda shook her head from the dark thoughts as the smoke of her cigarette drifted up to the stars.

"You look better tonight," Miss Wardwell said.

Zelda spun around to see their dinner guest standing behind her. The candlelight of inside was awash behind her, and Zelda could feel the warmth of the hearth leaking out into the night.

After a moment Zelda nodded, her hand coming up to rub at her chest. "Thank you," she said softly.

"Have you been sleeping?" Miss Wardwell asked politely, like a physician asking a patient if they'd been taking their pills. It was cold and clinical and not at all what Zelda wanted.

She shook her head. "Only for a few hours each night," she murmured. "But it's been better since..."

Miss Wardwell was kind enough to not expect her to finish her answer and she smiled and nodded. "I'm so glad I could be of service."

She took a step closer and they were standing shoulder to shoulder, and they both turned to look out into the night. It was quiet, and Zelda could hear Sabrina and Ambrose laughing as they were doing the washing up. Hilda was humming to herself as she packed away the leftovers into glass Tupperware, and the moon rose a little higher in the sky. Then, Miss Wardwell took the cigarette from Zelda's fingertips and took in a deep breath of her own.

"Do you want me to come back when they're all asleep?"

"Yes."

...

This time, Miss Wardwell came in through the back door. They wandered up the stairs together, walking quietly and avoiding the seventh step that creaked. Zelda slipped into bed and watched the other woman take off her shoes and place her coat on the chair, just like the time before.

Her bed was still the same size, as Zelda had not changed it back to twin. The schoolteacher raised her eyebrows at this and Zelda just shrugged.

“I’d hate to be predictable,” Miss Wardwell chuckled, but she climbed into the inviting bed all the same. And then she slipped beneath the covers, which was not like the time before, and turned to curl in facing Zelda.

Zelda swallowed at the sight, and after a moment curled in too, until they were face to face, a few inches apart. They weren’t touching, but were close enough to feel each other’s breath on their faces. Zelda reached over to turn off the lamp and plunged the room into darkness. The moonlight poured in through the window, and long shadows were cast along the floor. Zelda breathed in and out.

“I’ll be gone before the rest of the house wakes up,” Miss Wardwell assured her after a moment.

Zelda nodded, and felt herself fall slowly, and then all of a sudden to sleep.

The glowing eyes of owls in the trees

Zelda dreamed of the clearing again.

The birches sat all in a row, with their white bark shining bright. The flakes stripped away in horizontal strikes to reveal the tree beneath. There were black marks and scratches along the trunk, and the blackness seemed to pull Zelda in until she swayed in the knee-deep snow. She turned, as she always did in the dream, to see her palm split down the middle, and blood was dripping down her fingertips. As she examined her hand, sunlight flung itself across the snow and the world was set ablaze. The dreamed seemed clear, the details sharp and brutal, but before she could look up to see the dawn she felt herself falling and falling, until she woke up.

She startled awake to the sight of Miss Wardwell trying to extricate herself. Sometime in the night, Zelda must have inched closer to the other woman, until she was draped across her. Zelda's head was resting on Mary's chest, and her arms were holding her tight. It was not like her at all, and Zelda blinked as she tried to pull herself awake.

"I was just leaving," Miss Wardwell explained softly. "It's nearly five."

Zelda looked up at her, blinked again, and then nodded. She felt a little embarrassed at her slowness, and wondered what the other witch thought of her clinging to a stranger in bed.

The room was still in darkness, but Hilda was an early riser, and the sun often didn't make an appearance until half seven. It was the dead of winter, and the January mornings often felt like the dead of night. Zelda slowly removed herself from the warm embrace and sat up until she was eye level with the school teacher.

"You'd best be off then," she said. It was a dismissal if ever she'd heard one, but Zelda's voice was thick with sleep when she had intended it to sound cold and aloof.

"Yes," Mary Wardwell agreed. "That would be best."

She lingered, however, despite her words, and Zelda raised her eyebrows as the woman remained in the bed. Zelda shivered at the sudden cold, and resisted the urge to pull the other warm body back to her. Sometime in the night the fire in the hearth must have gone out, and the room was frigid. Miss Wardwell was close, and Zelda looked at her and felt drawn to her darkness, just like she'd been drawn to the blackness in her dream. Her eyes slipped down to the woman's lips.

"You talk in your sleep, you know."

Zelda bristled and felt her blood boil as she tore her eyes from the lips that taunted her.

"I most certainly do not!"

She all but leaped up and stood to cross her arms. She spun around to look at the witch who lingered long after she had promised to be gone. Her hair was still impossibly perfect, and her neckline plunged and left little to Zelda's imagination. She'd forgotten for a moment that intimacy was a two way street. That in inviting the other woman to her bed, she would reveal parts of herself few ever saw.

Miss Wardwell smiled kindly, and Zelda wanted to hit her, hex her, do anything to get that pity off her face. "You do," she murmured.

Zelda felt her shoulders droop, and all her hot anger dissipated. She felt just as tired as on the first night Miss Wardwell had gone to bed with her. She tried to hide it and turned to gracefully put on her robe and pulled the silk tight around her. The thin fabric did little to ward off the cold, and she shivered. For once she wished she had more practical tastes in sleepwear. She turned to look at the other witch and she sighed.

"Pay it no mind. It's just ramblings," she dismissed with practiced ease.

"I'm not so sure," Miss Wardwell whispered after a moment.

Zelda brought up her hand to pinch the bridge of her nose as she felt a headache coming on. She squinted her eyes shut. "Just... just leave it."

Miss Wardwell huffed in exasperation, as if she was conversing with a toddler. "Well, you know best."

Zelda opened her eyes at the other woman's tone, and for the first time, saw a crack in the facade of Miss Wardwell. "Yes, I do know best," she said with finality, as she stood a little straighter and placed both hands on her hip.

She looked at the other woman, really looked at her, and became irritated by how perfectly normally it seemed to have her in her bed. For the first time Zelda wondered what an excommunicated witch was doing in Greendale, former acolyte of Edward's or not. She had come to protect Sabrina, or so she said, and to get her to sign The Book. But the baptism was done, the book was signed, and yet the stranger lingered. What was Miss Wardwell still doing in Greendale?

"It's time for you to leave," Zelda commanded.

The woman straightened, still seated on the edge of Zelda's bed, and her eyes were glowing in the dark. "Isn't it just," she said with a smirk.

And before Zelda could speak, a soft wind blew through the room, despite all the windows being firmly shut, and the witch claiming to be Mary Wardwell vanished with it.

...

A circle of protection rings this house. And no witch save a Spellman may cross it. Any unwelcome witch that tries it shall burn!

Zelda whispered the chant as she walked the borders of their land, spilling salt in her wake. It had been a bluff of Ambrose's, in a confrontation that seemed like a lifetime ago. It was high time Zelda made it a reality, and she wound her way through the trees, walked along the stone wall by the road, and marched up the drive to the house. She whispered alarm spells so that if anyone should try to teleport into their house they would be torn apart, and cast witch traps so that any trespassers would be nailed to the ground. It was a cruel trick, but Zelda was tired of being surprised.

When the borders were fortified, Zelda walked into the kitchen to see Hilda making breakfast. She was humming softly and Zelda sighed at the sound. She was always surprised at Hilda's patience. She had patience for Sabrina and all her melodrama, patience as she waited for the yeast to rise as she made bread, patience for the small seedlings to grow into plants in the conservatory.

Zelda had little tolerance for such things, and left them to Hilda. She was more of the big picture sister, and Hilda was the small details. Hilda busied herself with the dishes and the shopping, the making of candle wax, and the growing of vegetables in the garden. It would never occur to Hilda to lay a trap for invaders, but Zelda would rather her be unaware of such things. Despite their differences, Zelda loved her sister.

Before Edward died it had always been the three of them. His death left Zelda feeling betrayed. They were supposed to make the journey of life together. Their parents were buried in the plot in front of the house, but Edward was somewhere in a watery grave. And she had buried Hilda in the Cain pit again and again, and every time she felt her solitude grow vaster and vaster, until it swallowed her up.

Perhaps it was her patience that made Hilda so strong. Zelda had long suspected that if she wished it, Hilda would be the more powerful of the two. She had a fierceness, and a gift that Zelda did not. Hilda could see into the very heart of a person. She could sift through the minutiae and the intricate web of small lies, and she could unravel the spool until she found the broken shard that scratched along the surface of every memory that happened after. She rarely used the gift, since nearly every time she saw the broken parts of people it broke her own heart too. She had used it in the bookstore, when the boys were pestering Sabrina's friend. It was unnerving, to see it done, and the people Hilda picked apart were always a little lost for a while after.

Hilda was still humming as Zelda picked up her china and sipped her first sip of morning tea. She sighed, and felt the warm liquid slide down her throat and pool in her belly. She placed the cup back in her saucer and marveled at the healing powers of tea. Hilda looked across the kitchen island and smiled. Zelda smiled back.

Humans thought dreams weren't real because they were not of this world. A dreamworld wasn't a physical place, and there was no matter or particles in a nightmare or a vision. But witches knew that dreams were real. They were made of images and memories, things yet to come, and long lost hopes. A dream that returned to a witch often was like a messenger, come to warn of future happenings, or to remind her of things forgotten.

Zelda's gift was to dream the deaths of people. Sometimes the deaths would be years yet, and sometimes she dreamed them as they happened. Death walked with her almost every night,

unless someone alive slumbered near. Her first dream had come to her on the night after her Dark Baptism. Her body had hummed with power, and Zelda had thought she would never sleep. But sleep came, and she saw the milkman's daughter drown in the river. Zelda had thought it a nightmare, but they found her body three days later. Her face had turned white, and the fish had gotten to her fingers and eyes.

Zelda had moved her bed back into Hilda's room the next night. They never spoke of it, and Zelda had told no one until she had found Edward wandering the halls too. He suffered terrible insomnia, and he claimed it was a sleep demon that tormented him. Zelda nodded and offered up no explanation of her own, as they sat in the parlor and drank warm milk, and waited together for the sun to rise.

Edward used to tell them stories of how he would be a healer or a great mage, or a philosopher. He whispered tales of his future adventures in the far east, in Africa, and in the crystal clear seas of the Caribbean. The adventures were always in far flung places, anywhere other than Greendale. He had those adventures, but eventually he came back to become The High Priest. Sometimes one needs the place one belongs to.

Zelda smiled as she remembers the hollow promises of would-be lovers. They had said all manner of pretty things to her when she was young. They said they would go to India, and bring back the tusks of elephants. One witch had promised to go to the diamond mines deep in the earth, and come back with jewels the size of goose eggs. A vampire had promised to travel to Stonehenge and bring back the tallest rock, and another witch had said they would spirit themselves away to the distant arctic, to slay the mighty polar bears and bring back their hides.

They had meant those ridiculous things, and Zelda had laughed and pocketed the words. But no promise had been more thoughtful, more full of love, than the promise Hilda made to Zelda every night. The promise that she would be there in the morning. And here she was, making them breakfast.

Edward was long dead, but the absence of their sibling yawned between them. And perhaps it was the fear of being left alone that made Zelda cling to her so tightly. Letting her go- well, that would take time.

Hilda was wearing that ridiculous outfit again, with the zany wig and the over-the-top makeup. She was going to work, and she bustled around the kitchen making Sabrina's lunch and watering the plants in the mason jars that lined the window. Hilda hummed some song that Zelda had heard in another life, and she closed her eyes behind her newspaper, and felt the vibrations fill the room.

"A calming spell, really sister?"

Hilda stilled, having been caught like a rabbit in the sight of a fox.

"Just a cheeky little one, Zelds." She sighed, and placed the watering jug back on the ground. She turned to put on her coat, and looked at her sister warily.

"There's really no need," Zelda huffed. "I'm... coping."

“Ah,” Hilda laughed sarcastically. “With cigarettes and booze?”

Zelda lowered her newspaper and glared at her over the top. “No.”

“No?” Hilda asked, arching her eyebrows.

“No.” Zelda said, and promptly disappeared behind the Norwegian paper without further explanation.

“Well... I’ll leave you to it.” Her voice was uncertain, and Hilda slowly backed out of the kitchen. Zelda held her breath until she heard the soft click of the front door and the engine of the hearse roar to life.

When the sound of the car drifted off into nothingness Zelda sighed and dropped her newspaper onto the table. She crossed her arms and leaned back into the chair and looked up at the vaulted ceiling. She wondered how long one should wait before it was socially acceptable for a witch to ask another witch back to bed.

...

The first sleepover Sabrina had after her friends found out she was a witch was a little awkward.

Zelda didn’t know how to act around Susie and Roz. She’d never had much experience with children. She had been one once, of course, but that had been several centuries ago.

They were giggling in the parlour, pouring over charm books and discussing love potions of all things. They were playing with Sabrina’s new hair, and whispering secrets to each other, and Zelda suspected Hilda had even given them some enchanted laughing toffee.

Sabrina’s friends loved her new hair, and they marveled at the way it almost seemed to sparkle. It reminded Zelda of when they used to go out into the darkness on hot summer evenings when the moon was full. They would carry moonbeams home in jars, and collect stardust from falling meteors. Sabrina had been so small, and the jars had seemed almost as big as her, but she had insisted on carrying her little treasure all the way home.

It was entirely inappropriate for a Witch Household to house mortals for an evening, but the Spellmans were already damaged goods in the eyes of the coven, and Zelda found herself missing the old days when Sabrina would actually speak to her.

So she had said yes, and accepted the din of teenage drama, and disappeared into the study as soon as the film Beetlejuice was turned on. She stayed close, and left the study door open so she could listen vaguely to the chatter of Sabrina and her friends being happy. She read her Satanic Bible as Hilda knitted in the corner, and Ambrose enchanted the girls with tales of Houdini.

When it was time for sleep they all went up together, a sea of girlish delight and Zelda huffed as Vinegar Tom slumbered at her feet. Hilda’s spiders were weaving webs in the window, and

snow was falling softly outside. She lingered in the study long after the girls were quiet upstairs, and let the warmth of the hearth seep into her bones.

“This is nice,” Hilda sighed, as she paused her knitting to sip some peppermint tea.

“Yes it is,” Zelda murmured, as the fire crackled in agreement.

...

The logistics of finding some physical comfort without the embarrassing spectacle of a public orgy were quite irritating. The unfortunate thing was that Zelda had been alive for so long that she knew almost everyone. Vampires didn't age, and witches lived for so long that eventually you met practically every eligible bachelor or bachelorette on the magical market. Miss Wardwell was a breath of fresh air, new blood in a stagnant social circle, and Zelda hated how much she already missed the feel of the woman beside her. Last time she had lasted a fortnight, almost two weeks. This time she barely lasted two days.

For Satan's sake they'd only slept together twice. And that's all they had done. Sleep.

But Zelda was restless, and she paced the length of her bedroom for two nights, until she thought she would wear a path into the wooden floor.

She paced now, as the girls were asleep in the bedroom down the corridor. Zelda could hear the soft sound of Hilda snoring, and Vinegar Tom growled in his sleep in the pantry. Zelda wandered through the house, down to the kitchen, and down to the embalming room. She placed her hands on the cold metal of the slab. Their morgue was nearly empty at the moment, and business was slow. Zelda felt the cold metal of the table in her hands and she thought about how warm Miss Wardwell's hands had been on her waist. They had been soft, and gentle, when Zelda had expected anything else.

She shook her head as she stood amongst the dead, and decided she wanted to feel a little more alive. She cast off any sense of self pity, and swallowed her pride as she walked through the back door, quietly shushing her familiar as she went past him.

Under the moon, the road that ran from the edge of the forest gleamed like water. It curved and wound itself up the hillside, all the way to Mary Wardwell's house. The trees lined the way perfectly, and Zelda took a deep breath of the woods air that drifted to her, as she turned the hearse off the road. It was nearly midnight.

She parked the car and locked it before turning to walk to the front door. She could have teleported here, having memorized the address a few weeks ago after their first night. But she didn't know what magic protected the house, and she wanted to take the time to drive, just in case she changed her mind halfway through the journey.

Driving at night always felt like a different plane of existence, like one was just a little out of synch with everything else. Transportation always brought a little magic, a liminal space as one shifted from one place to another. Hospitals reeked of magic, and portals to other realms were often found in storage rooms or in the basements. People were dying and being born and there was magic in that too.

Train stations in the afternoons always shook humans up, especially when the train was perpetually late but somehow just around the corner. Petrol stations held thin barriers too, with ancient attendants who looked like greasy nineteen year olds.

Zelda saw the glowing eyes of owls in the trees, and she smiled at them as she approached the house. It was a small, quiet, and entirely ordinary looking house. It looked warm and inviting and there was a light on upstairs, so Zelda knocked three times on the door and turned back to look at the night.

The moon was still a small crescent, having only grown a little since Mary Wardwell had dined at their house two nights ago. It was a lovely night, dark and deep, and the roads had not been too icy. The sky was clear, and only a few clouds slid past, and Zelda looked up at the familiar constellations as she waited for the door to open.

She turned as the light downstairs turned on, and the door opened and there she was. Zelda hadn't expected her to be wearing a floor length red robe, but witches always were a little ridiculous, always a little out of time with fashion.

Zelda watched as she placed one hand on the doorway and one hand on her cocked hip and looked at Zelda like she was going to eat her. Zelda shivered.

"And what," Miss Wardwell cooed, "are you doing here?"

Zelda felt a thrill as the woman looked her up and down. Perhaps there was magic in it, and perhaps the spinster schoolteacher had cast a spell that made Zelda crave her presence like a drunk craved a drop of drink. Perhaps there was more to this pull she felt, or perhaps it was just that she felt at peace when she slept with someone else in the room, in her bed, in her arms. And perhaps she simply wanted Mary Wardwell. Perhaps it was as simple as that.

"I was just passing," Zelda said with a smile. It was a lie that neither woman believed, but it would save her blushes. "Saw your light on," she said as she pointed to the light in the window above the front door.

"Really?" Miss Wardwell asked with smile of her own. "Halfway up the mountain, and at the witching hour?" She tilted her head as she licked her lips and Zelda felt her breath hitch. She realized all of the sudden that Miss Wardwell could say no. With one word she could send Zelda packing and back into the night with humiliation all over her. But Mary Wardwell didn't say no, and Zelda didn't turn back to look at the owls watching them.

"Lucky me," Miss Wardwell said, and stepped aside to let Zelda through.

Zelda still didn't trust her, and she had many questions that she knew in her heart would go unanswered. But she knew that this had been inevitable. Their arrangement had been one of convenience, and Miss Wardwell had been helping her because Zelda had prayed to Satan for help. Well, she had prayed to Lilith for help, and the help had come in the lovely shape of Sabrina's history teacher.

It was only to help her sleep, and it was only meant to be one night, but that didn't stop Zelda from asking her again, and it didn't stop her from meeting Miss Wardwell's lips halfway.

She sighed into the kiss, and let herself be led up to bed.

The tracks of a bear lingered in the snow

They fell into a pattern rather quickly. It was a casual intimacy that seemed almost vital the more time Zelda spent around the other witch. Sometimes Zelda would lower the barrier that surrounded the Spellman house and would whisper her name, and the other woman would teleport into her bedroom. Sometimes Mary Wardwell phoned her, just as the Spellmans were sitting down to dinner, and her voice would drip like honey across the line as she asked Zelda to come over as soon as she was able.

They did not spend every night together, as Zelda was often busy with harvesting bodies or dealing with the latest Sabrina crisis. Sometimes Mary wasn't home when Zelda called, and she didn't ask where the other women went, sometimes for hours at a time. It was not her place to know, it wasn't as if Zelda was her lover.

She didn't know what they were to each other, but their encounters were messy, almost violent. Their first time had been awkward, as first times almost always are. They had stumbled over Zelda's heels as she kicked them off, ran into the wall, and nearly tripped on their way up the stairs. Their teeth had knocked together, and Mary had laughed and bit Zelda's lip so hard it nearly bled. They had made it to the other woman's bedroom, panting, and Mary had grinned as she pushed Zelda down onto the bed. Mary made her come three times before the night was over.

Zelda had laid in Mary's bed utterly spent, until she had felt herself begin to doze. However, before she could drift all the way to sleep the sun had begun to peek through the trees, and Mary had nudged her and whispered into the stillness.

"You should go."

Zelda had nodded, and had arrived home just before the sun was clear of the horizon.

...

They kept it secret. It was an unspoken agreement, just like the first few nights had been. Although Zelda rarely slept anymore when she was with Mary. There were far more interesting things to do, and most of the time Zelda returned home exhausted. She would sleep for a few hours until the household woke up. She did not dream.

She tried not to appear too chipper, especially after Ambrose had stared at her one morning when she smiled a little too much over eggs. She maintained her air of practiced aloofness, reading newspapers from far off places where she had once lived. It was her way of keeping track of the old haunts, the places where she had been young. Hilda just mumbled under her breath and Zelda ignored her, and accepted the gentle peace of the morning.

She often spent her days alone, since Ambrose went to The Academy most mornings. Sabrina went to school, and Hilda went to the bookshop. After much thought Zelda had resigned from her position at The Academy. It had felt wrong, to stay there after Lady Blackwood had died under her care. With hindsight, she had seen what Faustus had been trying to do, making her

unholy godmother to his child, giving her the job his wife had only just vacated. It was an insidious thing, to replace one's wife with one's mistress, despite all his admiration of the old ways. It had made Zelda sick.

She didn't want to be a man's whore, even if he was The High Priest. And she certainly didn't want to be a replacement wife, now that the first wife was in the ground. Besides, she had Mary now, although Zelda couldn't recall when she had started referring to her as that. Until recently she had only been *Miss Wardwell*. But it felt strange and formal to call her that, especially after all the delicious things they had done to each other.

She called her Mary when they were alone, before and during and after. Usually the after was filled with the hurried putting on of clothes, and trying to find the brassiere Mary had torn off with her teeth. But sometimes they had time, especially on Saturdays, when neither of them had anywhere to be. They lingered together, and Mary watched from the bed as Zelda slowly put herself together.

It started innocently enough, until it became a ritual of sorts; Zelda putting on her makeup, and Mary watching from her place in the tangled bed sheets.

Zelda started with her cream, spreading it across her face and down her neck, smoothing it across the wrinkles that had only just begun to show. Then, concealer and setting powder, a hint of eye shadow and a single coat of mascara. She reached for her lipstick, but the only colour she had with her was bright red, hardly fitting for a casual Saturday.

"I've just the thing," Mary said when she noticed Zelda's hesitation. She stood up from the bed, naked save for her silk slip, and padded over to the vanity. She rummaged through the small drawer at the top, and brought out a black stick with a gold circle at the top. She swirled the stick until the soft pink was exposed.

"Allow me," Mary murmured and Zelda didn't hesitate to lift up her chin so that Mary could apply the lipstick. Mary's left hand gently cupped her jaw, and Zelda couldn't help but lean into it. Her lips opened and her eyes were focused on Mary's face, just as she was focused on Zelda's lips.

This kind of intimacy, the one between women, was fascinating. Zelda hadn't been with a woman in a couple of centuries, and she'd forgotten what it was like to share these moments. Their faces were close, and Zelda felt herself grow warm from the closeness. She brought her lips together as Mary stood up to look down at her and examine her handiwork.

"Beautiful," Mary said softly.

Zelda smiled.

...

Once a year Hilda and Zelda left Greendale and traveled down to New York. It was a long journey in the old hearse, but traveling by broomstick at night was tricky, especially when one had cargo. They loaded up the boot of the car with jars of liver and hearts, kidneys and

bones. They had boxes of dried herbs that only grew in the Greendale forest, potions Zelda had brewed throughout the year, and paper bags filled with Hilda's famous lavender soap.

They drove all the way down into the heart of the city and parked outside a witch boarding house. The old woman who had owned the place since before Zelda could remember smiled in recognition and booked them in. She waddled up the stairs and showed them the room. Her hunched back seemed to have bent even more with the years, and Hilda thanked her kindly and took the large brass key from her gnarled hands.

They collapsed in the little twin beds that sat side by side, and put their feet up for a spell.

"I always forget how loud the city is," Hilda sighed. Zelda hummed in agreement without opening her eyes. They'd become backwood witches, unused to the dark energy and insistent stimulation of the city. The neon lights seemed to shout at them, and the rush had rushed them off their feet. Sirens wailed in the distance. Car horns honked, and the bustle seemed to roar in comparison to the quietness of Greendale. A man with pamphlets stood on a street corner and shouted about the end of the world.

They dozed for the rest of the afternoon, recovering from their journey, and waited until dark before they sat out for the markets.

The bazaar was held once a year, in the deep heart of winter when the world was halfway through the darkness. January had flown by and February was around the corner, and Hilda and Zelda had brought their wares and were eager to sell. Hilda had her eye on some root or other that was said to have great healing abilities. Zelda needed a new rune set, and was thinking of buying a couple of new translations of the classic spell books. They made their way through the city streets until they found the green door.

It would look like nothing to a mortal, just a door in a wall on a quiet side street. To a witch it seemed to glow, and writing scrawled across the top in slanted letters. They looked around to make sure they were alone, before Hilda murmured the password. The door slipped open and they stepped into the market.

The lights of the bazaar shone brightly and cast a golden hue along the hidden road. The lanterns and candles and witch-lights shined so bright that Zelda couldn't help but smile. She glanced over at Hilda and saw she was smiling too. She remembered coming here when they were children. Edward and Hilda and Zelda had fought the whole journey down, shouting at each other in the back of the carriage. They were dragged through the city by their weary parents, but when they had stepped through the door they had quieted, suddenly enchanted by the lights and general splendor of the winter markets. It still had that same thrill, and Zelda felt her heart glow as they walked past the shops.

There were trinket shops and florists, herbalists and candlemakers, boutiques and chocolate shops. There was a fire eater wearing a mask with a dragon's face, and a puppet show was happening outside a children's bookshop. Children were bunched in front of the wooden stage, and the magicked puppets moved and spoke and the children giggled with delight at their antics. It was cheerful and merry and Zelda glowed as they walked beneath the glittering fairy lights that criss-crossed above their heads, making a canopy of light that mimicked the night sky.

“I always forget how marvelous it is,” Hilda said over the din.

Zelda nodded. “It’s glorious.”

They traded their preserved body parts for babylon candles and rare spellbooks. Hilda found that plant she was looking for at the herbalists, and they wandered through a few bookshops, picking up books and leisurely sifting through the pages. They weren’t in any hurry, and it felt nice to wander. Zelda huffed at a copy of The Vegan Cookbook for Witches, scoffed at a new and utterly ridiculous translation of The Satanic Bible, and turned up her nose at the fashion the young witches were wearing in the city. She wondered when she’d become so old fashioned.

They visited a jeweler's, bought some new bangles, and wove their way through the streets until they reached the end of the market.

“Shall we head back?” Hilda asked. She looked weary. It had been a long day.

“I think that would be best,” Zelda said, and they turned around and made their way back to the portal door.

As they neared the other side of the bazaar, they walked past the last stall. They had not noticed it on their way in. An old crone sat beneath a small awning, wearing a black cloak and holding a pipe in her right hand. Her spectacles made her eyes look three times too big and her white hair was pulled back into a severe coil. She sneered as children ran past her stall, and grumbled after their laughter.

“A curse on your house,” she muttered, before leaning back in her wooden chair to blow a perfect ring of smoke from her pipe.

“Is that the fortune teller?” Hilda gasped . “She can’t possibly still be alive can she? She’s been old for ages?”

Zelda eyed the old woman as she hurried her sister along. “I think you might be right Hilda,” she whispered.

The old woman spotted them and grinned and Zelda shuddered when she saw the toothless smile.

And then something happened, as snow began to fall. The lights grew a little dimmer, and the laughter of children faded. The road seemed empty, and suddenly it was just the three of them all alone. The old woman shivered and sat up a little straighter. Her face became gaunt and she looked ancient and terrible. Tarot cards lined the little table, and one had a painting of a clearing of white birches. A green monster stood in the circle of trees and its eyes looked up at Zelda.

“End of the world is coming young Zelda,” the fortune teller said around her pipe.

Zelda felt her blood run cold.

She grabbed Hilda by the forearm and pulled her away and walked swiftly toward the door. Her hand was shaking as she reached the golden knob, and she yanked the heavy door open. New York howled on the other side, and she pushed Hilda through. Her sister gasped as she nearly tripped through the portal, but Hilda did not hear the last words of the crone.

With her sister safe on the other side, Zelda looked back. The old woman cackled and her face was hidden in shadow beneath the tent. The embers of her pipe glowed, and her eyes were glowing too.

“And you’ll be there to greet it like an old friend,” the fortune teller promised with a knowing smile. “Won’t you young Zelda.”

Zelda said nothing to the entity with the face of an old woman, and turned to walk through the door and back to Hilda.

...

Hilda lay still in her bed, long after they had returned to the hotel. Zelda looked up at the ceiling as she listened to the sounds of cars going by. It was nice to share a room again, even if it was just for one night.

She wished Hilda was asleep. Her sister was thinking so loudly that Zelda could practically feel the questions oozing out of her.

“What did the old woman mean Zelds?” Hilda asked after about an hour of silence.

Zelda didn’t answer. Hilda sat up slightly and looked over at her. “I know you’re not asleep,” she said.

Zelda huffed. “I don’t pretend to understand the ramblings of an old city crone, Hilda.” She turned until her back was facing Hilda. “Pay it no mind, she probably went mad decades ago.”

She could feel Hilda still looking at her and she prayed to Satan that she’d drop it. Because Zelda didn’t know what the old bat had meant, but she knew it was coming. There were whispers of covens falling off the face of the earth. Whole families disappearing overnight. The covens would go silent, and a warlock would be sent to investigate. They found nothing but ash.

Perhaps it was witch hunters, or disease, or any number of things. All Zelda knew was that their numbers were dwindling. Magic was fading, and maybe soon, the lights would go out.

And then there was the problem of conceiving. Witch pregnancies were difficult, and often unsuccessful, and magic couples could try for decades and never get pregnant. It was why witches often made bargains with mortals that ended with the mortal giving up their first born. At least for a few decades the witch could have a child, even though they would outlive the mortal child in the long run.

The end of the world, Zelda thought. She turned the words over and over in her mind.

Zelda had never dreamed the death of the world. She had dreamed of death ever since she became a witch, and it was why she became a midwife and why it was so ironic that she ran a mortuary. She clung to the beginnings of life, even as she was haunted by the endings. She made a living off of the dead, harvesting their blood and unwanted organs. She embalmed and cremated and buried, again and again and again. Each time she held a screaming newborn child she tried not to dream of them that night. She didn't want to know the end just yet.

Hilda finally drifted to sleep and snored quietly in the other bed beside her. Zelda slipped into a dreamless slumber and thanked Lilith for small mercies.

...

When they returned to Greendale the next day it was nearly dusk. They brought in their new treasures and gathered them in the mudroom at the back of the house. Vinegar Tom came to greet them from the pantry and Salem meowed and rubbed himself against their legs. Hilda cooed softly at the familiars and went to sort out dinner.

Zelda went to light a fire in the hearth.

"I see Ambrose and Sabrina managed to not burn the house down," she exclaimed to Hilda as she heard the oven turn on.

"A miracle," Hilda agreed good naturedly, as she bustled around the kitchen.

Zelda smiled at the sound. The fire roared to life in no time, and Sabrina came home from her friend's house and Ambrose made an appearance just as dinner was served.

"How was the Winter Bazaar Aunties?" He asked as they tucked in.

"Marvelous," Zelda smiled. She drank her brandy and eyed Hilda over the glass, and they made no mention of the old woman with the glowing eyes.

The phone rang, and Mary's voice was on the other side, and Zelda excused herself after dinner. She ignored the knowing look in Hilda's eye, and walked out the door. She reached the end of the barrier and felt the shiver as she passed the magic border and teleported away.

...

Mary had her on the edge. Zelda was pressed down, face first into the pillows. Her legs were spread wide, and Mary was draped across her. She had three fingers working into her, in and out so slowly that Zelda wanted to scream. She wasn't even fully undressed, and her skirts were rucked up around her waist. Her heels were still on, and her underwear was dangling off her right ankle.

Mary pressed into her again, all three fingers burying into her to the hilt. Zelda sobbed.

"Faster," she moaned into the pillow. Her hands were clutching the bedsheets, and she was sure her knuckles were white with the effort.

“Shh,” Mary shushed into her ear. She was so close that Zelda could feel her breath on her neck. Mary’s whole body was almost on top of her, and Zelda had never felt so wonderfully helpless. Mary’s fingers slipped out again.

Zelda's breath was coming in ragged pants now, and she groaned at the slowness as Mary took her time. She whispered a few words and all of Zelda’s clothes vanished. Then, Mary nudged her legs a little further apart, and she changed the angle slightly and Zelda cried out. It was so, *bloody* good.

“Please,” she sobbed with a breathless gasp. Mary pushed her further into the mattress in response and Zelda whimpered. She was utterly surrounded, thoroughly and utterly fucked.

She had already come once, down in the kitchen when she had first entered the house. Mary had been baking of all things, and there was a tiny gingerbread village all spread out in the sitting room. Zelda had laughed at the flour in her hair and Mary had growled and taken her on the table. The idea of Mary baking was ridiculous, but surely not as preposterous as the notion of her teaching history to the hormonal teenagers of Baxter High. But all thought left her suddenly as Mary picked up the pace.

She moaned and trembled as she clenched down on Mary’s fingers. Then, Mary pressed her tongue flat against Zelda’s neck and slowly licked her way up her throat, until she reached her earlobe and took it between her teeth. She curled her fingers and found *that spot*, and Zelda squealed as she ground back into the woman’s palm. With muffled cries she came undone, and her hips rose up involuntarily as she chased her release. She felt herself pulsing, and she shuddered and collapsed into the bed, panting and spent.

She felt boneless and heavy, and she sighed as Mary lay down beside her. She chuckled as Mary wiped her hand on the back of Zelda’s thigh.

Zelda looked over as Mary began to stroke her buttocks with the back of her fingertips.

“You missed me,” Zelda accused with a sparkling smile.

“Perhaps,” Mary confessed after a moment. “I’ve grown used to you.” She looked pained by the idea, and Zelda’s heart clenched.

“Is that so bad,” she murmured back, as she felt her eyelids grow heavy. The drive back from New York had been long, and she felt the weariness of travel catching up to her.

“It’s apocalyptic,” Mary whispered cryptically.

Zelda frowned, but was soothed by a quick kiss to her forehead.

“I have to tell you something,” Zelda yawned, “about the winter markets. There was a woman...” Her voice drifted off into another yawn.

“You can tell me in the morning,” Mary assured her, before whispering something soft and heavy beneath her breath. It wasn’t a language Zelda recognized, and she tried to ask what she had said, but she fell asleep before another word left her lips.

...

Strange things were happening in the Greendale Woods. Well, strange things were always happening in the Greendale Woods, but these things seemed more urgent. Hikers were disappearing, hunters were being hunted, and the trees seemed to reach out with clawed branches, as if to snare the cars passing by.

Ambrose noticed the tracks one morning, as he walked back from a party at a warlock's house. His leash from the court was getting longer and longer, and Zelda knew the day was coming when he would be able to come and go as he pleased.

He was stumbling up the drive, still a little tipsy, when he saw a pair of animal tracks in the field beside the house. The tracks were strange, in that they did not amble or curve or weave through the snow. Rather, they marched straight from the forest and all the way up to the border, suddenly stopped- and then disappeared. It was as if the animal had vanished altogether without a trace.

They were small tracks, most likely a rabbit or a squirrel, but unsettling all the same.

"Nothing to worry about, darling," Hilda reassured. "Most likely just a forest spirit who got lost and vanished with the sun."

Ambrose didn't seem to believe her.

Sabrina's power still emanated from her, and at first Zelda thought the spirits were drawn to that. Perhaps they were drawn to the raw, untapped magic that spilled out of the walls as Sabrina slept soundly in her bed.

The tracks grew bigger as January turned into February, and suddenly the tracks were made by deer. Perhaps it was a single doe that walked from the forest up to the border and stood sentry until sunrise. Spirits of the forest visiting the homes of witches was hardly unorthodox, but it was the consistency that became alarming. They came every night, although the Spellmans never saw them. Ambrose tried to catch a peek as he peered out the window late into the night. The fire crackled, and his hands came up to cup around his eyes, and he leaned against the cold window pane until dawn. He stayed there all night and saw nothing, but the tracks of a bear lingered in the snow as the sun rose.

On the last night in January, Zelda stayed with Mary. It was a rare thing these days, ever since their arrangement had become more carnal in nature. She rarely slept when they were together, rarely spent the whole night, and she was gathering her things to go home when she saw something standing outside in Mary's garden.

The figure was at the edge of the forest, bathed in moonlight, standing utterly still and looking up to the house. Zelda went quickly down the stairs. Mary followed her, and they stepped out onto the stone step and looked at the spirit.

He was an albino moose, old and tall and beautiful. His antlers looked heavy on his head, and they were half shed. His hooves were buried deep in the snow, and his tracks led away behind

him, into the thick trees. He was ancient and his eyes glowed in the moonlight and Zelda didn't understand why she wasn't afraid.

"They sense change long before we do," Mary murmured. She took Zelda's hand and squeezed it. "Like when they sense a forest fire, or the rain of a thunderstorm that's miles away."

The spirit stood still and watched them, the fog of its breath lingering and hanging in the air, before evaporating into nothingness.

"I thought they were drawn to Sabrina," Zelda whispered. Her voice was trembling. She turned to look at Mary. "I don't understand? What do they want?"

Mary shook her head, her eyes large and blue. "I hardly know."

When Zelda turned back to look out into the night, the spirit was gone.

...

It was Hilda's sentimentality that was the undoing, the needle that burst the bubble.

She was pouring over old photographs as Sabrina and her friends got ready for The Valentine's Day Dance. Zelda shuddered at the thought of Sabrina cavorting with mortals on the polished wooden floor of the Baxter High gymnasium. But it was what she wanted to do with her Friday night, and Hilda took about a thousand photographs as the girls posed on the steps in the foyer.

"You look wonderful, my darlings," Hilda cooed and Zelda resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Just a few more," she said before raising up the camera and clicking away again.

"I think we have enough Aunt Hilda," Sabrina chided kindly, and walked down the steps. She was wearing makeup and a dress and Zelda hated how grown up she looked. Perhaps that was why she had taken Leticia. In anticipation of Sabrina growing up, moving out, not needing them to take pictures for her anymore. Soon enough the nest would be empty.

"One more," Zelda said, and she gracefully took the camera from Hilda, and nudged the two of them together on the bottom step.

Hilda beamed, and wrapped one arm around Sabrina's shoulder as they smiled into the camera. Zelda heard herself utter the words "say cheese," and then Sabrina and her friends were out the door and on their way to dance the night away.

"They grow up so fast," Hilda blubbered, and Zelda placed a reassuring hand on her elbow, but walked off before Hilda could see her own gleaming eyes.

A few hours later she found Hilda pouring over old yearbooks with a glass of wine.

"Come Zelds, look at this." She handed the yearbook over to Zelda. She sat down in the armchair opposite and settled with the book in her lap. "Look how young she is," Hilda sighed. "And it was only a couple of years ago."

Zelda hummed in agreement as she looked down at Sabrina's photograph. A black and white fourteen year old Sabrina looked up at her. Zelda smoothed her fingertips across the glossy page and they reminisced for a while.

They talked for a bit, but Hilda never could hold her drink, and she drifted to sleep after an hour or so. She slumbered softly, and Zelda woke her once she started snoring. She nudged her and guided her up the stairs and tucked her into bed.

"Love you," Hilda mumbled, still half asleep.

Zelda wandered down the stairs, tidying up the study, putting Hilda's glass into the sink and the wine bottle back into the fridge. She walked back past the study and saw that the yearbook was still open on the chair. She wasn't sure what made her do it, but she walked across the room and leaned down to pick up the book. It was heavy and cumbersome, and Zelda balanced it in one hand as she flipped to the faculty section.

Her fingers wandered down the page until they glided across the face of Mary Wardwell. Only it wasn't Mary Wardwell. It was someone else entirely. Her face was the same, but her eyes...

Those were not her Mary's eyes.

Zelda dropped the book as if it had burned her, and she stepped away from where it landed on the carpet.

She wanted to scream.

How had she not noticed? All the burning questions she had wanted to ask before they began their little tryst had faded to the back of her mind. All of her wariness had faded with that first kiss. Her hesitations and frustrations with the mysterious Miss Wardwell had gone up in smoke, as soon as they had slept together side by side. She had claimed to be in love with Edward, yet made love to his sister. She had claimed to be there because she wanted to protect Sabrina. Yet she was the one who gave a teenager a Book of the Dead, who showed Sabrina the way to limbo, who took her to the hanging tree and made her sign The Book.

Zelda felt the veil of whatever enchantment that had befallen her peel back, and she was left feeling hollow. She felt herself tear to pieces and cried as she tore down the border protecting the house and vanished into the ether. The tears streamed down her face as she marched up to the door and tore it open, walked up the stairs and into the bedroom where Mary Wardwell stood, as if waiting for her.

"Who are you?"

The creature just grinned.

"What are you?" Zelda sobbed. The tears were coming so quickly now, she thought she would drown. *I almost loved you.*

"Are you a witch?"

The creature shook her head. "No."

"Are you a demon?" Zelda shouted through the tears.

The creature just cocked her head, unmoved. "Not quite," she sneered, and Zelda charged forward. Her voice was different, dark and twisted and unnatural.

She raised her hand to strike it, harm it, pull it close to kiss those lips that had brought her so much painful pleasure. The creature caught her arm with ease and held it still between them, her hand gripped tightly around Zelda's delicate wrist.

She was so tired. She felt herself sway.

Her body wracked with sobs as the creature's other hand came to wrap around the small of her back. It pulled them together, until they were toe to toe, and Zelda couldn't help but drop her face, until her forehead rested on her shoulder.

"Why did you do this to me?" she whimpered into the creature's neck. She smelled of sulfur and fire and *Mary*. Sometime in the months behind them, Zelda had become bewitched, and she mourned the loss of the spell. She breathed the creature in, and wondered why it all hurt so much.

They stood together, Zelda clinging to her and the creature shushing her quietly. Zelda wanted to scream, wanted to break things, wanted to tear the world apart. She wanted to ask the creature to fight her, kiss her, kill her and be done with it. She asked another question instead.

"Are you a fairy?" she asked into the creature's neck.

The creature scoffed, and Zelda burrowed further into her.

"Are you a fallen angel?" Zelda tried again.

"Hardly," the creature chuckled, as she smoothed her hands along Zelda's back.

"Are you a devil," Zelda asked uncertainty.

"Warmer," the creature whispered into her ear, and Zelda shivered as she sniffled. Her tears had stopped and she leaned up to look the creature in the face. The last question echoed in her head, and her brow furrowed as she gazed into the familiar face.

Could it be?

The eyes were dark and Zelda felt herself pulled to them, like she always was to darkness. *I so very nearly loved you.*

"Ask," the creature urged, as if reading her thoughts. The creature grinned that grin Zelda loved and placed both hands on Zelda's cheeks. Her thumbs came up to wipe away the tears, and Zelda's eyes slipped shut at the tenderness. She took a deep breath and asked.

“Are you a god?”

“Not yet,” the creature murmured, and with a soft kiss, teleported them away.

They whispered back immortal longings

The world was not getting any smaller, there was just less in it.

Lilith could feel it in the water, taste it in the air. The earth shifted, the continents drifted, and the atmosphere filled up with smoke. The mountains climbed higher and higher, the volcanos rumbled and erupted, and the great ice cliffs melted and crashed into the waters.

So much had been lost. Vast cities had crumbled and were half sunk in desert sands. Civilizations were conquered, empires rose and fell, and the tombs of mighty kings were forgotten. All things turned to dust. For Time, the thief, eventually takes all things into his keeping. All things have an ending.

Even gods died eventually. Before the world could usher in the new, the old must be put to rest. The old gods died in a cold, dark place, as their temples were slowly abandoned, or destroyed by ice and fire. Some gods died slow deaths as new gods eclipsed them. Some gods were overthrown or cast aside in times of famine, when shiny new idols brought the harvest. And some gods died quickly, as their people disappeared without a trace. Whatever the cause, the shrine candles went unlit, the worshipers forgot the names and the stories, and the gods faded until they vanished altogether.

Lilith remembered when the world had been empty. She had known nothing but the garden and her husband. It had been a wild, frighteningly beautiful place, and she had wandered the pathless woods for days at a time. She had spoken to the animals, sung to the trees, and listened to the crickets and their orchestra. The nights had been long, but she had been able to sleep then, and she had found the perfect bed in the tall grasses.

One day, Adam had come looking for her. He wanted to have her, but she wanted to see the top of the mountain.

“How high it goes,” she had said. “We would be able to touch the sky.”

But Adam cared not for the mountains, nor for the valleys and streams. He drank from the river that ran through the garden, but did not marvel at its banks nor its crystal waters. She and Adam had been created at the same time, built from the same clay. They were the same, yet he pushed her to the ground and demanded things of her that he could never give back.

For Lilith, that was original sin.

It was not the apple and snake, nor was it the tree of knowledge and all its secrets. And certainly not sweet Eve, who had looked out into the world and wanted more. Original sin was this; man hurting woman for his own pleasure.

It turned out, man could generate evil all on his own, so she turned her back on god and turned her back on man. What was there left to believe in? She prayed for freedom and he came. He showed her a gap in the wall and they went out into the world together. She had

been saved from despair by a fallen angel, but time and experience showed her that she had simply left one master for another.

Satan still had her on her knees.

...

Magic had existed long before anything else. Only time had come before. Magic was in the roots of the oldest trees, in the very first air, and in the deepest parts of the sea. It did not belong to anyone. It simply was.

Witches and warlocks could use it, and magicfolk were born with it. It was a birthright. The great secret that Lilith knew, was that magic did not come from Satan. If a witch did not sign her name in his book, her powers would not fade. Magic was inside them, all around. But he lied and tricked them, and demanded their souls for power, and Lilith helped him do it. He gained strength from their worship, and kept them cloistered from mortals. He gathered up their love like grapes from a vine and devoured them. Sometimes Lilith would get the scraps.

In a way she had been the first witch, but time had corrupted her body. Her skin was now green and oily, and her eyes were nothing but black holes. Her hair was dead, and her soul was no more. She was neither living nor dead, simply something in between. She was no longer a woman and no longer just a witch. She was not a demon, although she was their mother. She was just a concubine, a housekeeper of sorts, a footsoldier.

He had dangled the throne in front of her for a millenia, like a treat she could snatch with an outstretched hand if she behaved herself. However, whenever she got too close he would say there was one more vital quest, one more mission, one more soul that needed corrupting. She tore herself to pieces to cross into the other worlds, traveled through realms of fire and disease, conquered continents and lost all meaning of her own self beyond his will and desires. She was nothing more than an extension of his arm reaching out to destroy.

Where was she without him?

Nowhere.

After a thousand years only a dream linked her to herself, a hazed and belated dream of what she had been. The dream was like the wall around the long abandoned garden, useless and solitary. The scaffolding of her foundations were covered in moss and rotting from the inside out, and the structures were slowly crumbling into dust.

What was she without him?

Nothing.

She was just a footnote long forgotten by history, kept to the margins and smudged into obscurity.

...

She did not know when her mission changed. Perhaps it had been when Sabrina muttered the words. “How will I ever defeat The Dark Lord?”

Whatever could she mean? One could never defeat him. But there was another secret only Lilith knew.

Satan was growing weak.

He rarely crossed the borders into the other worlds these days. He only astral-projected, or took momentary possession of unsuspecting mortals to get a point across. He used theatrics and cheap tricks, smoke and mirrors. He sent his minions into battle, dispatched his demon children, and when it mattered most he sent Lilith. He did not come himself.

One day, a million years ago, she had asked him how he planned to kill other gods. Their stories were strong, and the people believed them. They loved the gods of the harvest and the gods of thunder. Their myths were the compost that grew and flourished into religions. Devoted worship and love made beings strong, could make them into gods. It all started with a story, with an idea.

“How can you defeat an idea?” she had asked.

He had looked down at her like she was a fool and had answered like an elder would answer a child.

“Why, my dear Lilith, with another idea.”

...

Once she had almost asked him to kill her. The dark ages had been raging, and a plague had crawled its way across the world. He had been distracted, preoccupied with the scale of souls, trying to do anything to beat god. He kept sending her out to spell men’s doom, and he made her do terrible things. She reveled in it, but it meant she was gone from Hell, sometimes for years at a time. She missed him.

Kill me, so that I may haunt you and never leave you. I would haunt you like the murdered haunt their murderers. I could always be with you, instead of out there in the abyss where I cannot hear you.

It wasn’t love that she felt, how could it be? For she belonged to him, when all she wanted was to belong *with* him.

Sabrina was not the first would-be replacement. There had been others before her, bright witches who had been young and beautiful when Lilith was neither. She had gotten rid of them in one way or another. But Sabrina was the first who did not want to take Lilith’s place, and Lilith wondered if this really could be the witch he longed for. She was still a child, young and full of all the simple pleasures of living. How could he replace her with a child?

It reminded Lilith of all the stories she’d hated, the ones where the villains at the height of their powers, were toppled over by amateurs. The chosen ones in legends were always

orphaned nobodies who somehow managed to destroy their enemies just by being special, because some backwater hag had prophesied it. How could Sabrina be her equal? How could he want her and not Lilith at his side?

She had killed Stolas for saying her deepest fears aloud. *Forgive me Madame, but doesn't it seem that Satan is grooming Sabrina to reign at his side, not you?*

It did seem like that, didn't it? Perhaps that was the moment her purpose had changed, when she realized he was weak and planned on marrying a child. He did not intend to give Lilith the throne.

Where would she go?

She had already half-polluted Sabrina, who had slit a witch's throat and had smiled as she burnt thirteen of her own kind with hellfire. The best and worst things happened in the shadows.

She was the mother of demons, the dawn of doom, satan's concubine. Once she was done grooming Sabrina to take her place as footsoldier, she would earn a crown and a throne by his side. She had been the future queen of hell, but not anymore.

She prayed to him on the longest night, and begged him to call her home to the pit. She wanted him to prove her wrong, dispel her fears, comfort her. *Give my life meaning.*

He did not answer, and a few weeks later, Zelda summoned her to bed.

...

There was a thing in Zelda that dreamed of trees. She spoke in her sleep that first night, and Lilith had watched her until she had begun to stir. She had vanished when the woman's eyes began to flutter open, and she stood alone in Mary Wardwell's cottage and wondered how Zelda could know the dead language.

On the second night she knew that Zelda dreamed of things that had not yet come to pass. Her dreams stayed with her, they changed her. They had gone through her, like blood through water, and altered the colour of her mind. She was filled with sorrow and untimely knowledge, and she said things no witch should say. Her lips dripped with ancient power, and Lilith wanted to enter Zelda's dream.

She had done it before, when her daughter Batibat had tormented the house. But a synthetic dream is easy to maneuver, easy to find. A real dream is tempestuous, unpredictable and treacherous. It's also just good manners to not enter a woman's dream without her knowledge. There, in the dream, the world is all the dreamer's own making, and Lilith did not know what kind of world she would find.

One night, an eternity after they had started sleeping together, Lilith had been overcome by something. Zelda had been inside her, and was looking down at her. Her red hair was everywhere, and Lilith had reached out to push it back behind Zelda's ear. It was a movement

she liked, and Lilith knew that if she buried her fingers in Zelda's hair and tugged just so, she could get her to moan in the most delicious way.

Zelda looked down at her, and there was no longer just lust in her eyes. No longer just the need for a warm body to keep the nightmares at bay. There was something else. Something Lilith could not name. It made her want to do battle with all the ugliness of the world.

The softness around Zelda's stomach was her favorite bit. She liked the way it smoothed around her hips. Lilith loved to kiss her there, and to drift her fingertips across it once Zelda had settled beside her. They had not slept together since the first kiss, and every night Lilith had to resist the urge to lull her to sleep with soft words, soft kisses, a soft spell to keep her in the house with her. She had never wanted anyone like this. She had no memory of this feeling, this yearning. She wanted to end it, but Zelda kept praying to her with mumbled words before meals and before bed. She whispered praises over little happenings peppered throughout the day, and it made Lilith powerless to deny her anything. She ached for Zelda's company the way a tree longed for secret streams of water.

She couldn't find the words, but it was the first time she had ever thought of anyone's existence beyond her own. Her children were her creations, and her demons were scattered across the realms. Some had been destroyed or vanquished, some were yet living, and some had been long abandoned. She had never felt this affinity with them.

What had god thought when he created her? The great miseries of the world were in part her fault. She wreaked havoc, sowed chaos, and tormented the dying and the dead. What was her purpose, is she was entirely contained in hell? For so long her purpose had been for Satan, her lord and master. But if he perished, she would remain, and the universe would continue. Perhaps their love was like the leaves in the forests, destined to change and die. Lilith's love for magic and for the earth was like the constant rock, unchanged by the seasons. She wondered if Zelda loved the rocky mountains too, and if she had ever climbed them to see if she could touch the sky. The sky was empty, and no god lived in the clouds, but there was magic in the sunrise, and that was enough.

Heaven was not at some secret elevation, and hell was not really beneath their feet. The realms were like the chapters in a book, pressed together but separate. They were all part of the same story.

And there wasn't just one heaven or hell. The universe was more complicated and far more interesting than that.

...

"You'll have to be quiet," Zelda growled into her neck. Zelda pushed her against the bedroom door. "My family is downstairs."

She whimpered, reeling as Zelda took her hard and fast and did her very best to make her scream.

Later, Zelda kissed her sweetly, and Lilith wanted to tell her. She wanted to tear off the skin of Mary Wardwell and see if Zelda Spellman could love a monster. When Zelda slept she

always pulled Lilith close, and Lilith murmured protection spells over her, until she ran out. And then she would whisper declarations in the moonlight, when declarations had the most power.

“I would enter your sleep if I could,” Lilith whispered, “and guard you there, and slay the things that haunt you.” Zelda burrowed closer, as if comforted by her words. Lilith smoothed the hair from Zelda’s forehead and kissed her temple sweetly. “But I cannot protect you unless you dream of me.”

She never woke up when Lilith spoke, and Lilith let her doze for a little while. And then Lilith would leave and send herself home, away and away and away. Zelda still didn’t trust her.

Perhaps it was a bit presumptuous, a bit possessive of her to speak to Zelda in such a way. She longed to hear of Zelda’s despair, longed to tell Zelda hers. She wanted to be known, wanted to belong.

When she felt Zelda look down at a graven image of Mary Wardwell, Lilith let the veil lift, and she took back the enchantment and let Zelda see. She waited in the stillness until Zelda came for her, storming into the house like a hurricane.

She came alone, as if they were going to have it out as a little domestic. Lilith couldn’t help but grin, it was their first real fight.

“Who are you?” Zelda sobbed.

I don’t know.

Who was she without him?

Lilith should have foreseen it. The signs were there, if one knew where to look. A dead bird brought in by a cat, a spilled bottle of black ink. A broken mirror in an empty room. A loaf of bread split clean down the middle. A blind woman knitting her own death shroud, aware of what’s coming. Impossible tracks in the snow.

Forest spirits as old as Lilith came to see Zelda with their own eyes. They gazed at her and they liked what they saw. So Lilith took to the forest and found the places where the barriers were thin. She whispered to her children the words of rebellion and they liked what they heard, she was their mother after all. They whispered back immortal longings, for they too had grown restless in the shadows. They sensed the magic fading, and they wished to see the dragons fly again.

She had thought Sabrina would be the one to kill her, but it was Zelda who killed her in the end.

“Are you a god?”

“Not yet,” she murmured.

...

All women were taught to fear power, but Lilith was no longer afraid. She would take her power, wield it, and she would save the world.

Satan had always demanded the freedom of witches in exchange for magic. Lilith would give Zelda power, and in her power, Lilith would gain freedom. She had no book of names, no great stone table, and no rites written in her honor. She had only the blood that flowed in her veins.

Real magic could never be made by offering up a sacrifice, or by burning someone else's heart. One must tear out one's own heart, and not expect to get it back. A true witch knew this.

"Give me your heart, and I'll give you mine," she murmured to Zelda as she slept. "It is a bitter and broken thing, I don't know if it even works. But it is yours, should you want it."

All gods need a high priest. All gods need a prophet. Zelda was born for it, and Lilith wouldn't have anyone else.

If one kills an idea with another idea, how does one kill a god? By becoming a god too.

But who was she without him?

She hardly knew, so she went with her lover to the place where gods were born, in the sliver between the realms. The forest fire brought the end of all things, white birches grew from the ash. With every ending there was a beginning, with every death a new life. Balance.

Who was she without him? It mattered not, for she was creating herself anew. His world would end, and hers would begin. She would eclipse him.

Traveling between realms tore the membrane to pieces, and coming here would have destroyed Zelda had she done so alone. Lilith had kissed her just before they traveled, and put her to sleep to block out the pain. She held her close as they stood in the clearing of white birches. Zelda's face was still tucked into the crook of her neck, and Lilith looked to the horizon.

The snow was deep and lovely, but the cold did not reach them. Zelda was all peaceful, and Lilith leaned down to rest her forehead against Zelda's. She let her eyes slip shut and imagined for a little while that she was sleeping too. She stood like that for an eternity, until she was ready. Then, she opened her eyes and kissed Zelda's cheek, and woke her with the kiss.

The sun was rising, and with it, the world was beginning again. It was the dawn of Satan's doom.

Zelda opened her eyes.

She went up to the mountain and was alone

Zelda woke to find herself in a dream. She gasped and pushed Mary away, stumbling backwards in the snow.

“Where am I?” she gasped. She looked around wildly at the familiar trees, their white bark and black knots. She saw the first yellow light of morning stealing across the sparkling snow, and it cast long shadows behind the trees. They were high on some lonely mountain, in a place that did not taste of earth.

“I know this place,” she whispered to the treetops.

“You’ve seen it before?” Mary asked softly.

Zelda looked at her sharply. She had almost forgotten the other woman was there. She was normally alone in this dream, but she was not dreaming now.

“How dare you bring me here,” she sneered, wherever this place may be. She raised her chin. She was glad of the steely fierceness in her voice, and she glared at the woman in front of her. Her body was humming with magic and she felt something looming in the air, as if a storm was brewing, even though the morning air was clear. They must have traveled far.

“I had no choice,” Mary said simply. It was a hollow explanation, and Zelda realized now the entire woman was hollow. She was just a disguise with a false name and false face.

“There is always a choice,” Zelda argued. “You could have let me be.” She had asked her to leave once. Leave the town, leave my house, leave my bed. Yet she remained, and Zelda was haunted by it.

“No,” Mary shook her head after a beat. “I couldn’t.”

Her voice was soft, and Zelda bristled at the softness. She wanted none of it. She wanted anger and hatred, she wanted fire and rage and to smite this pretender onto the side of the mountain. She did not know what to do with all of this, this *thing* between them.

“That is not your face,” Zelda said angrily, and for the first time the other woman looked nervous. Zelda decided that was sure footing. “Let me see it,” she demanded.

Mary huffed. “It’s just a face.” She sighed when Zelda crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows in a challenge. With a muttered curse, she brought up her hand to peel back the skin.

Zelda tried not to show anything when she looked at her. The face was haunting, cruelly strange and twisted. It was the face of something that had seen the beginning of all things. Her eyes were black, and her teeth were jagged and askew. Her fingers were long and thin, a witch’s hands. She seemed taller, now that she was without disguise. Zelda swallowed as she loomed before her.

Zelda raised her chin again and looked the creature in the eyes.

“You’re Lilith,” she accused, although she couldn’t help the tinge of wonder in her voice.

“Guilty,” the woman grinned. It was unsettling, like the grin of the possessed fortune teller in the marketplace. Zelda shivered. That was not her Mary’s grin. Although she probably had never even met the real Mary Wardwell.

“Why did you bring me here?”

Lilith cocked her head. “Don’t you know?”

Zelda shook her head, her arms still clasped around her.

“Why, sweet Zelda, I want you to make me a god.”

Zelda laughed. “You would be a false god,” she dismissed without hesitation.

“Perhaps,” Lilith muttered. “False to some.”

“There is only one god,” Zelda recited, the words learned from rote memory, the passages echoing throughout her childhood and all the way through the years to now. “To say otherwise is blasphemy.”

“Then call me a blasphemer, I don’t care,” Lilith spat. “But his time is ending, and I would end it with a sword at his throat.”

Zelda gasped at the bitterness in her bones and the violence in her words, and took a step back as Lilith began to walk toward her through the snow.

“You have dreamed of this place because you were always going to come here,” Lilith declared, as if she was preaching the word from the pulpit. “And I was always going to be here to meet you.”

Like an old friend.

“That first night, you spoke in your sleep Zelda,” she continued. “Do you remember?”

Suddenly Zelda looked away to the trees, anywhere but at her lover. She had never told anyone, had only hinted to Edward, and Hilda had only guessed half of it. Satanic confession had always been a time of repenting, and she had never confessed to the things she saw, lest the coven try and crack open her mind and see the secrets spill out of it. She hated being seen like this, hated to be torn open and rendered vulnerable.

“You spoke the first language, the dead tongue,” Lilith said more quietly when Zelda’s eyes start to glisten. “The one I used to sing in the garden when I dwelled in Eden.”

Zelda shook her head, looking to the ground and then away to the sky as she tried to fight back tears. Lilith took a gentle step toward her.

“It’s the language magic was first spoken in, long before Sumerian and Latin, and long before men learned to harness it.” Lilith came a little closer, and her voice was reverent now, as if seeing Zelda for the first time and finding her beautiful. Zelda stood still, as if she had suddenly grown roots like the trees.

Lilith reached her, and to Zelda it felt like the journey had taken years, but it had only been a few steps across the clearing. Lilith reached out tentatively, but didn’t let her hand quite touch Zelda’s crossed arms. Zelda still couldn’t look at her, but after a moment she reached out and let Lilith take her hand, and they stepped close again. They were toe to toe, just like they had been before Lilith winked them out of her bedroom and into this inbetween place.

Zelda heaved a sigh and felt a tear slip down her cheek. She looked down at where her hand was clasped with a green one. Lilith’s fingers were changed, larger than Mary’s had been, and her wrists were not as delicate. She turned the hand over to look at the way the skin seemed to glow in the sunshine.

“Why have you brought me here?” she repeated.

Lilith squeezed her hand.

“Because I have lost my purpose,” she murmured. “I have spent an eternity fighting the wrong battles. I now wish to walk amongst the garden of the earth and to tend to them.” Her voice was quiet, softer than Zelda had ever heard her. It sounded like a benediction.

“The greed of man has ravaged the earth. Magic is dying, *we* are dying Zelda.”

Zelda recalled Sabrina’s voice over the breakfast table. *We Spellmans are an endangered species* .

“He would have mortals grow and grow like a cancer,” Lilith explained. “I used to revel in the greed of men, and encouraged their darkest thoughts. They think they are so big, but they are tiny, like insects. They cannot see beyond themselves. They have polluted the land, the sea is awash with plastic, and the air grows thick with smoke. Even Adam never understood the beauty of the seasons.”

Zelda listened, earnestly, but her brow furrowed the more Lilith spoke. “It has been this way for centuries. Why now?”

“I hadn’t seen it before”, Lilith explained quickly. “I had been in Hell and could not see it.”

A lie.

Zelda shook her head. “No,” she said and finally looked up at Lilith’s face. Her eyes were still piercingly dark and Zelda found she missed the blue. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

Lilith paused. “The truth can be painful,” she said carefully.

“What can be more painful than this?” Zelda said, as she placed her hand on her heart.

Lilith watched her movement and her face grew haunted. “Satan wanted me to groom Sabrina to rule at his side.”

Zelda dropped her hand and reeled. She shook her head. “No,” she whispered. “She’s a *child!*” Her heart was beating fast in her chest, and she spun around, looking for a portal, for a door, for anything back to Greendale. All she saw were trees. *I have to get back, I have to protect her.*

“He can’t take her, it’s not what she wants!” she nearly shouted at the sun, at the trees, at Lilith. The tears were coming steadily now, and she sobbed at the thought of Sabrina dragged down to Hell, screaming. She would be molded and twisted until she was an abomination of her former self. Their Lord and Master was indeed a cruel one, if he intended to take a child to be his bride. “He cannot have her! I won’t let him!” she cried as she finally turned back at Lilith. “I won’t let him.”

“It is the Dark Lord’s will,” Lilith said.

Zelda shook her head, and came back to her. She grabbed at Lilith’s shoulders. She wanted to hurl her away, drag her close, she wanted to kill something.

“It doesn’t matter,” she whimpered bitterly.

She remembered when Sabrina had played a game of chicken with her in front of the entire coven. The lamb entrails had dripped blood all over the carpet, and it had taken a few of Hilda’s cleaning spells to get the stains out. Sabrina had looked up at her from the foot of the stairs. She had seemed so small.

Aunt Zelda, what would have happened if it was me who was selected Queen and not Prudence?

Zelda’s heart had clenched.

Would you have let them do to me what was done to Mildred?

Never!

“It doesn’t matter,” she repeated, and her hands trembled as she abandoned her god.

Perhaps it had been a long time coming. The lingering feeling of dread that had filled her when she realized that her coven had shrunk. In her heart her coven now only contained herself, two witches, and a warlock. The Church of Night had huddled in the dark and had left the mortals to their fate when the red rider had come to take them in the dark. They were a backwards crowd, fearful and sedate. They had excommunicated Hilda, imprisoned Ambrose, and they would have eaten Sabrina until they were filled to the brim with her sweetness.

Ambrose had told her of the secret meetings, the ones where only men were allowed through the doors. It was a splinter that would rend the coven to pieces, the small pebble that would roll away and start an avalanche.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said a third time, and the sky turned red with the sunrise.

“Zelda,” Lilith murmured.

Zelda looked up and smiled softly at Lilith. *I know your face, for you are the monster in my dreams.*

“He is a god because I made him one,” Lilith explained. “I worshiped at his feet, thanked him for my freedom, and begged him for a purpose” she said softly. “He gave them to me but put me on a leash and demanded I kneel before him.” Her breath was heavy now, and her chest heaved with ancient anger. “He is a god because my devotion made him one.”

They were silent for a moment, and the moment raged in the quiet.

“Is that what you will do to me?” Zelda asked quietly. “Have me on my knees?”

Mary shook her head, her eyes filled with something. Zelda thought it might be sorrow.

“No, my dear Zelda.” Lilith stood a little straighter and she reached out to take Zelda’s hands in hers. Her skin was cold and clammy, but Zelda clenched her hands around them and tried to warm them. “I would not want that for you.”

“What do you want for me?” she whispered.

Mary took in a deep breath. “I would have you in the forest, walking amongst the trees and singing my songs. Build me a temple of stone. I would have you in the valleys, and in the sand dunes by the sea, shouting out into the thundering waves that I am coming. I would have you at the source of the rivers, just as they come out of the ground. Stand in the lonely canyons and pray to me. Welcome the new world and worship on the mountaintop.”

Zelda shook her head. “These are words, riddles” she said earnestly. “I don’t understand.”

“You can love without understanding,” Mary insisted. At Zelda's frown her voice became small and frightened. “You do love me, don’t you Zelda?”

How can i love you? I barely know you. You are a stranger.

But then Zelda remembered the long nights, the moon above them, and the spirits looking out to her. She remembered the way Lilith had held her hand when she was frightened, and the look in her eye when she had called her beautiful. *I so very nearly loved you.*

Then, she found the right words.

“No, Lilith, I don’t love you.”

She echoed the words back, as if they had traveled around the world and the sound was hurtling back after the long journey.

“I don’t love you.” Zelda smiled. “Not yet.”

Lilith smiled back.

...

It wasn't anything like a dark baptism in the end, nor was it a rebirth. It wasn't even a coronation, although Lilith had placed a golden crown on Zelda's head. It had resembled the spirit's antlers, and a small red jewel sat in the center. The ruby had sparkled in the sunlight.

Lilith had conjured a blade and Zelda had laid out her palm but had gasped when Lilith cut into her own flesh instead. Her hand was sliced open and black blood dripped to the ground. Then, she handed the knife to Zelda and she cut her own hand open too.

"Blood for blood," Lilith said in a language Zelda had never heard, but knew in her heart.

"I name you my high priestess, my prophet. Without you I am nothing. Without you I would perish. We are equals. And so I give what you give to me, freely and of your own will."

They clasped their hands together, and their blood intermingled and moved through them. Zelda shivered as she felt the blackness seep through her and travel everywhere. She opened her eyes and was changed.

They sealed it with a kiss.

...

It felt senseless coming here, deep in the forest where no one would follow. She had no congregation beyond the trees and the spirits, the birdsongs, and the mossy ground. But she found broken twigs at the foot of the cairns, and flowers piled up, as if placed there by rabbits. Nuts and berries and little treasures, slowly gathered in little bundles on the ground.

It was senseless, but she had promised she would come. She brought incense and candles, and placed a ring of stones around the tallest tree and sat in contemplation for an hour or two. She had no prayers, for there weren't any rites for a new god. There were no ceremonies or services, no ritual she could fall back on. So she sat on the ground, and listened to the sounds of winter becoming spring. The forest was waking up after its long sleep.

At first she just sat, and waited the hour out. She rolled her eyes when nothing happened, and left with a huff. Then, she sat and tried to come up with something, some phrase or saying that would give her strength.

"Praise Lilith?" she whispered uncertainty, and looked around to see if the trees burst into flame at the blasphemy. Although it wasn't really quite blasphemy anymore. She waited for a moment, but nothing happened. And she left after a few minutes, slightly more discouraged than before.

She tried to tell Lilith of her dreams. They had faded somewhat, but they still came. She had almost asked Lilith to take them from her, relieve her of the heavy burden. But they were a part of her, and in the end she would not wish them away. She could no more go without

them than she could without the shape of her hands, the memories of her childhood, the sound of her laughter. No, her dreams were hers to carry.

She talked about her family instead, about Sabrina's schooling and Ambrose's new travel plans. Hilda had been working on a few new recipes, some were marvelous and some were marvelous disasters. It was a quiet form of worship, and Zelda wasn't sure if anything would come of it.

Lilith had been formidable, frightening. Her face had been the monster under her bed, the thing lurking in the corner of her eye in her nightmares ever since she was young. Zelda missed her.

She talked about the changes in Greendale as the snows retreated and the ground grew soggy. The streets were muddy and the tires of the hearse had gotten stuck twice on the way home. There was a new baby on the way, a young couple in the coven were expecting. It had brought new life to the coven, and the couple's families were bursting with excitement. They were eager to have Zelda be the midwife, but were puzzled by her absence from church.

Zelda had not been to the Church of Night since Lilith had popped her back on her front porch with no more than a quick kiss on the cheek and a murmured goodbye. She wasn't excommunicated, at least not officially. It was self imposed exile, and Zelda had gladly perpetuated the fortuitous rumors about her and Faustus.

"He stares at me while he's preaching Hilda."

Hilda had shuddered. "Stay here then, and we'll have a cuppa."

She hadn't told Hilda about Lilith. How could she? *"Hilda, I've turned my back on Satan and am trying to overthrow him and put his lover on the throne. Although she's my lover now."*

Ridiculous. The whole situation was quite ridiculous. Especially since they were strangers to each other, or at least Mary was a stranger to Zelda. She still had trouble calling her by the right name.

She didn't tell Sabrina, even though she was upset that her favourite teacher was out on sabbatical. The teachers of Baxter High were leaving at an alarming rate it seemed. Mr. Hawthorne was still missing, after all, and a virgin had been found murdered near the hanging tree. Ambrose didn't know, but he had come to Zelda late one evening, after being out at one of Faustus' secret meetings.

Insects, came Lilith's voice in Zelda's head, and she couldn't help but agree.

"What is he planning?" she had asked Ambrose carefully.

"I don't know," he said worriedly. "I'm still not entirely trusted. And it doesn't help that none of you attend services anymore."

"It's complicated," Zelda said quickly. "But I can't go back there."

Ambrose eyed her warily. "Did he... did he do something to you Auntie Zee?"

Zelda smiled reassuringly, and reached out to touch his elbow. “No, my dear. Nothing like that. It’s just that... I have some qualms with what he’s teaching, and until things are different I just can’t bring myself to go there.”

Ambrose shook his head. “I still don’t understand.”

“I know, but trust me,” she said with a small smile, “things will work themselves out. They always do.”

Ambrose’s eyes twinkled in return. “Careful Aunt Zee, you’re starting to sound soft.”

“Promise not to tell anyone,” she stage whispered with a glinting smile.

“Promise,” he said.

...

“Praise Lilith, I guess?” she said bitterly to the trees.

It had been weeks and Lilith still did not come. The war in Hell must still be raging.

In Greendale the snow was nearly gone, and spring was right around the corner. The darkness of winter was fading, and the dawn came earlier and earlier every morning. The smell of fog hung in the air, and the first rain of the season would happen any day now. Grass was peeking through the pockets of snow, and the trees dripped water. The sound of the water falling from the branches was so loud it sounded like a soft rain. The drops fell from the roof of the forest and landed on the dead leaves on the ground. Large drops pitter pattered on the stone of the temple as the world melted.

The water fell on Zelda’s bowed head, and she waited.

“I miss you,” she whispered to no one in particular. She was all alone.

It was hard not to think of her parents, aged and infirm. They had left their deathbeds in the middle of the night and had gone into the forests to walk amongst the trees one last time. They had breathed their last under a canopy of stars and pine. Perhaps that is why old witches always retreated into solitude, and dwelled deep in the woods where the world of men could not find them. They left their covens, abandoned the teaching of warlocks, and lived as they wished. When things end, one yearns to go back to the beginning, to go back where one came from. Everything started in a garden.

Zelda had built a humble temple in the Greendale woods, and she attended it nearly every day. Werewolves came and howled at the moon, and goblins gathered to watch them. Fairy circles appeared, scattered throughout the forest floor, and the spirits followed Zelda as she wandered. They had unnerved her at first, but they meant no harm. The spirits greeted their new caretaker with raised heads, and they presented their coats of fur proudly. The Earth would thrive, and magic would return, if only one gave them attention. They were the same thing, love and attention, and Zelda felt herself returning to the old ways of when she was young.

She went up to the mountain and was alone, and felt the crown on her head. She was hardy and wild and free, and she felt magic in her fingertips. Her spells had always consisted of a set of words, a formula or verse, a ritual action. Now they spilled out of her with just a thought or a look. She required no runes or sigils, no poppets of clay. She had incantations in her heart, and the amulets of Lilith's kisses around her neck. She gazed into the gleaming reflection of pools of water in the mountains, and yearned for the return of her god.

"Tell me, what sort of god are you anyway?" she asked the wind. The wind howled back.

Lilith did not come.

God had heaven, Satan had hell, and Zelda would tend to the earth. Lilith was somewhere in the depths of fire, far out of Zelda's reach. All she could do now was fortify her with prayers murmured over biscuits, and one sided conversations with owls. The owls still lingered in the trees outside Mary Wardwell's cottage. Zelda had gone to board the place up, covering the furniture with linens, and locking the door behind her. It stood empty, but the owls were still watching and waiting.

"What are you the god of?" She asked the sea. The foam spread along the rock and lapped at her feet. The sea roared back.

Lilith did not come.

Zelda did not wail or tear at her skirts. She did not slaughter any lambs or spill another's blood. She simply looked to the earth with haunted eyes and went to bed alone. The path to the temple looked more and more trodden, and the trees seemed to move out of her way as she wandered through them. Mushrooms grew in a ring around the temple, and suddenly it was spring.

She prayed to Lilith for Sabrina to be safe, and prayed for Ambrose to be free. She prayed for Hilda to be happy, and for Leticia to grow up strong. She buried her worries beneath the altar, whispered her longings, and prayed for her god to come back to her.

When Sabrina had returned to the house the night Tommy was put back in the ground, they had cried on the steps together. Zelda had held her and whispered sweet nothings, shushing her and rocking her like she had when Sabrina was a baby. She had guided Sabrina through the house and up to her room, placing her softly in her bed. Sabrina had cried again, just as Zelda went to leave her.

"He said there was no flying in his life without me."

Zelda teared up at the thought. Mortal or not, Harvey Kinkle was sweet and true, though he knew not what he said. His words were beautiful because he had wanted to mean them, and Sabrina had wanted to believe them too. Zelda was glad she was there to pick up the pieces.

And now she was here, going through the motions, making her own secret religion. It had been easier than she thought. She would slay Satan himself if he moved to harm anyone in her family. And perhaps that is why it had been simple, because Satan thought he could take and take and give nothing back.

Zelda had changed when Lilith's blood had moved through her. She was no longer just a witch, but something in between. She was a conduit, a god's beloved. She had seen some of Lilith's life, flashing before her in bursts of terrific agony. There were earthly pleasures and great triumphs, but she had spent a lifetime crawling after him. Zelda wished to comfort her, wished to go flying with her.

"I want to fly with you," she whispered to the stars. "I want to touch the sky and feel the cold wind in my hair. I want to fall through air, and I want to see the world below us restored. And when my feet touch the ground again, I want you there to catch me."

But Lilith was a new god tangled up in conflict. Zelda prayed to her anyway, even if she could not grant her wishes or bless her with good fortune. She maintained the temple and brought offerings, and expected nothing in return beyond the promise that Lilith would one day return. It was a bizarre, futile sort of worship. What a foolish, hopeless, wonderful existence.

She took Hilda to the babbling brook that weaved its way through the trees. They remembered together, and Hilda clucked about the vegetable garden and about the possibility of Sabrina going to university. They worked together side by side, preparing the garden bed for spring. Zelda felt power in it, in the way the earth moved beneath her hands, the way the dirt lodged beneath her fingernails. She remembered the days when she would pick a bouquet of bluebells and foxglove, daffodils and lilies of the valley. She remembered the way Sabrina had followed her aunts, meandering behind them as she became easily distracted.

Perhaps Lilith was simply the god of Zelda, the god of the mountain dweller, the god of the vegetable garden. Or maybe she was the god of knitting? The god of so called women's work, the work that sustained a family, that gave life to a family. What kind of god loves a witch?

They made tea that night, and watched some film on the television. Zelda smoked as Vinegar Tom snored at her feet and she listened as Hilda chuckled at the film. Ambrose's music wandered down from the attic, and Sabrina studied on the floor by the fire. Her books were spread out and her notes were strewn about.

"Two schools, two sets of homework assignments," she grumbled as she highlighted another passage.

Hilda hummed in sympathy and Zelda held her tongue. The peace was treasured, and Hilda went up to bed after a little while. Sabrina went up to bed too but she watched Zelda for a moment too long.

Zelda wondered how long it would take for Sabrina to finally get the courage to ask her what was happening in the forest.

...

Zelda dreamed one night of an owl flying out of the impenetrable wood, and it came to land on the tree outside her window. It loomed and sniffed at the smoke coming out of the sleepy chimney, and it called to her softly.

We only have a few hours my love, the war is yet to be won!

Zelda woke to the call, walked to the window, and opened it quietly. The world was awash with silver, tucked in and sleeping under a blanket of shimmering moonlight. It was a grand, almost otherworldly evening, and the air was crisp and clear. It was a perfect night for flying.

And so she pointed to the sky and whispered softly to Lilith.

“My darling, the sky is too lovely to sleep tonight.”

The owl winked, and Zelda jumped out the window and felt her arms turn into wings. They flew up and up, until the earth was far away. Lilith would return to hell in the morning, and would make her way to the citadel. The demons and hell-spawn had taken up arms, and Lilith told her of the day's battle and how a queen had no need for a king.

Women should be in charge of everything.

Zelda laughed as her god flew beside her for a spell, and she soared beyond all the things she had known before.

A few clouds passed below them, and Zelda thought, just for a moment, that one was shaped like a dragon.

End Notes

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