

Just a little over a month ago, a group of Englishmen arrived at Romange, France. They declared witches were among us, and that they would destroy us given the chance. It started with a few accusations here and there, children playing a game until their mothers and fathers explained what was happening. Then fear of the unknown spread, more and more. It was like a plague spread through the town, stealing away everyone's common sense until all that was left was fear of the unknown. Today was not unlike one of those days.

"There are witches amongst us!" Pierre, the town's mayor shrieked into the air. "Witches, soulless witches, who will steal your children and sacrifice them to the Devil!"

Pierre's words drew a crowd in the town square, my mother and I included. "Helene, you needn't hear this." Mama whispered into her ear. "Return to the house and finish up that stitch, why don't you, *ma fille*?"

I shake my head, too enraptured to notice anything but the words Pierre spoke. There had never been witches in the town of Romange. At least, not until Englishmen came and spoke of witches and witchcraft. The men came and told Pierre of women who seduced men, men who swore to be pious and religious but still managed to be enthralled by their charms, women who cast spells and hexes and curses upon children and women who dared defy them. Why they decided to disrupt the peace, I wondered from that day on. Really, had they stayed in England or wherever they came from, there probably wouldn't be the whole uproar about witches. Shaking my head, I return my focus to Pierre, who climbed atop a box in the center of the dirt crossroads.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have found such a witch trying to hide in plain sight in our own town! She is, at this moment, ready to be put to trial by fire. Come, meet the wicked witch and watch her declare her villainous deeds!" Pierre leads the people with a flourish towards the townsquare, my mother among them.

"What a crowd, right?" A delicate voice comes from besides me, startling me into jumping. "If only she was actually a witch."

The girl next to me sighs, as if it was too much work to just utter those words. "Oh well. If they get it right one day, maybe they'll back off. What do you think?"

"I-I'm sorry, I do not believe we have met. My name is Helene, and you?"

"Lorraine. Pleased to meet you, Helene." Lorraine sticks out her hand but catches me in a hug instead. "Such a lovely name for such a lovely girl."

Her raven black hair feels soft against my palms and reaches the bottom of her corset. Pulling back, I see the green eyes adorning her face like emeralds. Jealousy blooms in my chest. Black hair like hers was my childhood dream. Being stuck with a dark brown hair color was disappointing to a young girl who dreamed of princes falling in love with her. And the tell tale green eyes of a story book heroine-- to be a hero, never be forgotten by the world. She was the picture perfect hero in every way.

"Helene? Will you be joining the crowd?" Lorraine sounds far away as I focus in on searching for my mother. The entire town probably gathered to hear Pierre. She was just next to me, but disappeared as soon as Lorraine appeared. She probably joined the crowd to see the witch.

“Yes, I am. And you?” I say. She purses her lips, a conflicted look in her eyes. But as soon as I see the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes, it’s gone. I guess both of us have some masks we use.

“Only if I can stick by you.” I nod with a smile and loop our arms together, walking towards the square with the rest of the stragglers. The entire time, we laugh and talk. I hadn’t known how much I needed a confidante before I met Lorraine.

Once we finally reached the square, a group of people were chanting. “Kill the witch!” The words reverberate in my head as we get closer to the taunting crowd, close enough to see a girl, who looked younger than me, tied to a wooden pole with kindling beneath her. She looked too young to die, from the looks of it only around thirteen. A pang of guilt hits me. Lorraine lets go of my arm and slips away before I could say anything to her.

I search for her face in the crowd for a few moments before giving up and finding Mother. But everytime I see the girl’s face, all I can think of is Lorraine’s earlier words about how she was innocent. Guilt wracked my body as I reached Mother, startling her before she pulled me into a hug.

“Helene, there you are. What were you doing?” She asks me, eyebrows drawn together.

“I was with a friend.” I hesitate before saying her name. “Lorraine.” Mother taps her chin with a slender finger, covered in cuts and calluses from years of embroidery. She shakes her head, clearly unfamiliar with the name. She starts to say something but Pierre yells to the crowd.

“Good folk of Romange! This witch will burn today, burn with the holy fire of God! Let her see what comes from fraternizing with the devil.” Pierre throws a small torch, just barely the size of my pinky, at the kindling at the witch’s feet.

“Please!” Sobs wrack the poor girl’s body, her voice hoarse and small. It kills me to stay still, but if I even move the wrong way, I’ll be next. And Mother can’t lose another person. Not after Father left. Not again. “Please, I swear I’m not a witch! I denounce the devil, I denounced him thousands of times!”

But the flames at her feet only grow. Her pleas fall on deaf ears and the chanting only grows louder and more reverent, as though the people were attending a church sermon instead of watching the murder of a girl younger than me.

She screams as the flames touch her skirts.

She screams as the flames touch her bare skin.

She screams as the flames grow so high that I cannot see her.

She does not scream when the flames turn her face to charred flesh.

The moment her screams stop, Lorraine is at my side, hefting me up from the ground. “She must be feeling faint. Witch or no, fire is quite painful, and she must not have drunk enough water today.” I hear her say to my worried Mother. “Don’t worry, I can help her.” All I feel are fingers brushing against my forehead and strong arms lifting me up before I succumb to the darkness.

“Wake up, Hel,” A melodic voice hissed into my ear. “Wake up.” I slowly come to, my sense of smell arriving first. Lavender and clary sage filled the air.

Groggily, I sit up and immediately regret it. A pounding in my head just makes the memories hazier than they already were. But when I open my eyes, I see none other than Lorraine herself in a small room surrounded by fluffy pillows and blankets. Taking a better look around, I see a fire crackling in the corner. It reminds me too much of the girl. The ceiling was low, and the walls made of dark brown wood.

“What? Where am I?” I ask, massaging my temples. Lorraine hands me a steaming cup before answering. “My home.” Her answer is so short and to the point it takes me back for a moment. I hadn’t expected her to be so forthright.

Seeing my confused expression, she elaborates. “You fainted, so I brought you here to help you. And perhaps teach you a thing or two, if you are up for it.”

Fainted? I could recall the darkness, but I had never fainted from the sight of pain. My mother’s skill with sewing led to her being the town’s go-to person for stitching up wounds. The injuries people come in with were much more bloody than the girl’s burnt body. Sipping on the tea, I wonder what Lorraine decided to teach me. She sat opposite of me, looking expectant. For what, I had no idea. “Lorraine? What did you mean by teaching me?”

She brightens up immediately and leans forward to touch my forehead. “Witches have a mark on their foreheads,” She explains, brushing away her bangs from her forehead, “It tells us who we can trust. And who might need our help, should they not know of their heritage.” She looks meaningfully at me, and I realize she might be talking about me.

“No!” I stand up, wincing at the pain in my head. “I’m not a witch. I don’t even know any witches.” Ice fills my veins. If I was a witch, I would know. Strange things would happen, there would be some sort of *sign*. But Lorraine just passes me a mirror and I see a mark, just barely outlined, matching hers. It looks like a star, outlined in a brown shade lighter than my skin tone. It was impossible to tell unless you knew exactly what to look for.

“What is that.”

“The mark, of course. You didn’t know it was there, did you?” She shakes her head, wrapping her arms around me in a hug. “Don’t worry, Helene. I’ll help you now.” We stand like that for what feels like forever, but must have only been a few minutes.

“Someone recent in your family had magic.” She drops the bombshell on me like it’s nothing. “It’s passed through the female line, but males tend to be able to pass it to their daughters. So now you tell me, Helene, do you really know who your parents are?”

She drops it all on me like it’s the easiest thing to carry. “I’m sure. My mother is my mother and my father is my father.” She arches a thin eyebrow.

“Are you positive? Who is your father?”

“He’s dead.” I say flatly. It was one of those things you just didn’t talk about in town. The death of Jules Aguilon was a tragic accident, the body never recovered. And by the looks of it, Lorraine understands.

“I’m sorry, if it means anything. But he might be the reason you have magic, Helene.” I chew on the inside of my cheek as I contemplate this. When his mother came over, strange

things did happen. Floors were swept quicker, stitches done inhumanely fast. But I didn't want this magic, I didn't ask for it. Regret blooms in my chest.

Everything could have been normal, had I just stayed away from Lorraine. Or any other witch. I should've just gone home, worked on my stitches and took care of Raphael. None of this ever would have happened. Lorraine must sense my discomfort because she switches the subject. "Now, let's move on to some more magic."

Uncertainty floods me but seeing Lorraine so radiant and passionate is stronger than the uncertainty. So I take a deep breath and nod, hoping I didn't just sign my death warrant.

"Open your hands." She explains, taking a herb I can't recognize and putting it into my hands. It was a dried flower, lavender I think. It was hard to find this flower in town. No wonder I couldn't figure out what it was. I had only seen it once. "Good. Now bring it back to life. Make it bloom, Helene."

It sounds so easy in theory. But truly, there's no way I could do it like Lorraine showed me. It looked as fluid as water when she made the flower bloom. She sighs, clearly impatient with my efforts. "Think of the flower in full bloom. The scent, the color, the feel." And though I would never admit it, her words make it easier. Within a few moments the dried lavender comes back to life.

Sucking in a breath, the lavender falls from my hands as I jump back, bumping into yet another pillow, this one a pale blue. "I did that."

"Yes, you did. Amazing, right?" Lorraine is hundreds of times more enthusiastic than I am, but I would be lying if I didn't say that at least some part of me is happy. Excited. But the fear is there and it's more obvious than the excitement. "Helene, you did incredibly. You do know that, right?" The uncertainty in her voice makes me look up at her. She was always so confident, exactly who I had always wanted to be. But something still feels off, in this room. Like we're not the only two people here. Like we're being watched.

"Lorraine, we are the only ones here, right?" The feeling of being watched makes me shrink into myself.

She blinks, as if the question is the stupidest in history. "Of course! Why on earth would I teach you magic if we were being watched?" Her confidence is reassuring, but it doesn't shake the feeling off. Instead, I choose to ignore it, chalking it up to nerves.

She thrusts more flowers at me, having me practice the magic until I could bloom flowers and move water and fire with little effort. By the time the sun falls, I am exhausted.

She grabs my hand before I leave the doorway. "We'll pick up tomorrow. I'll meet you in the square, ok?" I nod, still a little in shock.

The entire walk home I mulled over the newfound knowledge that I was a witch. Would my brother be in danger, then? My mother? Was it my father who I got the witch blood from?

Shaking my head, I hear a rustle from the trees next to me. My head shoots to the trees but I see nothing, the dark only impairing my vision. The crackle of leaves comes from that direction. *It's just the wind*, I tell myself. *Definitely not witch hunters coming to kill you and Lorraine for doing magic*. I keep walking until I reach the house, but the sun has set fully and

Mother stands outside, worry etched in her expression. My chest tightens at the realization that I made her feel like that.

“There you are, Helene. I was getting worried.” Her face smooths out, but years of worry can’t undo the lines on her face. And her once vivid brown hair is streaked with silver. Her chestnut hair was one of the few things I was similar to her in. Raphael looked more like her, and me like Father; at least when Father was still alive. His warm laugh and kind face were some of the few things I could recall of the time we had together. Mama ushers me into the house, shutting the door behind us.

“No need, Mama. I’m home, safe and sound. Just got a little too tired from the hectic day.” It seems to alleviate her worry even further, and she ushers me into the house. By now, it’s too late to do anything by even candlelight, and I am far too tired to do anything but sleep. And I collapse in the bed next to Raphael as soon as my head hits the pillow. But as Mother blows out the last candle and the cottage is thrust into darkness with only the moon to light the rooms, all I can think of is Lorraine’s sweet smiles as she teaches me magic in the secret of her home.

“I love you, Helene.” My Mama’s voice rings out as I fall into a deep sleep.

And in my dreams, all I see is flowers blooming and the sweet melody of laughter.

“Helene Aguillon, what on earth did you do last night?” My mother shakes me awake. She and Raphael stare at me with wide eyes. Wide eyes with terror in their depths. I sit up and see them. The Watch stands behind her, carrying chains in their arms. And suddenly I feel sick to my stomach.

“I was with Lorraine. She-she helped me after I fell ill after the witch burning.” But it’s clear from the look on her face that Mama no longer believes that’s all I did. She even hides Raphael behind her blue skirts. “Nothing-and I mean nothing- else happened.”

“Miss Aguillon, we have gotten information from a reputable source that you were practicing witchcraft last night under the guise of fooling Miss Lorraine Badeux into assisting you.” The tallest of the Watch says, his deep voice echoing through the silent house. Even the air felt thick with tension, as if it was holding its breath, waiting to see what would happen next. “You are being charged with witchcraft, and for your crime you shall burn. Should you die, you will be declared an innocent and Miss Badeux and your family shall be spared. Should you survive, we will kill you, your family, and Miss Badeux.” His cold blue eyes pierce into my very soul as I plead with anyone who would listen to save Lorraine and my family. To let me die just so they could be spared. *Spare them, please*, I beg with my eyes on the ceiling.

The next thing I knew I was thrown into the ground and Mother screamed a scream so loud it could have shattered the windows. “Stand down, witch! There will be no summoning demons in our town.” My wrists ache from the chains clamped onto them, much too tight, and too sharp, I could barely think straight.

“I-I wasn’t summoning any demons. Please, please let me go! I’m not a witch, I’m not who you are looking for!” At this point I’m willing to bargain anything in my arsenal. Even my

friend of one day, no matter how much she meant to me. “But-but I can tell you the name of a witch! And where she lives, I swear it’s the truth! I swear upon God.”

Seeing their dubious but contemplative expressions, I press on. “I can swear up and down that I am not a witch, that she was the witch, I swear it! I’ll even lead you to her home!” Finally they hefted me by my elbows. It didn’t work. The one thing I could barter away, and they didn’t even take it.

“Mayor Pierre will decide what to do with you.” Those final words sealed my fate as they dragged me in chains before the entire town. And then locked me up in a small, dark cell, used only for the worst criminals in town. Which apparently included me now.

There was a small part of me screaming that I deserved this, that Lorraine deserves a better friend than me, that everything was a lie. But my need to help Mother survive for just a few more years before Raphael could take over was too overpowering. And so I stayed in the cell. For how long, it was impossible to tell. But finally, just when I had given up hope, Pierre came.

“Miss Aguillon, what a surprise. I believe I speak for the entire town when I say that I had never expected you of all people to be a witch. Always the devoted daughter, working so hard to make sure her dearest mother and brother could survive.” He pauses, and I can see fear in every one of his movements. He’s scared of me, all because of what he thinks I am, never mind that’s it’s true. He’s scared, and there’s nothing I can do to change that. And it’s all because of a rumor and uncertainty of what I could do. “But the Watch does tell me you had a proposition. Why don’t you tell me this offer, I’ll think it over and get back to you.”

His voice is steady, but when he raises his hands I see a faint tremor go through them. And it feels so wrong, that someone so brutal like him could be so scared of me, when he was the one who murdered a girl not even a day ago. It almost feels wrong to sell Lorraine out. Almost.

“Yes.” I take a deep breath and meet his terrified stare with a level glaze of my own. “I have the name of a witch. Leave me and my family alone, and I will give you her name and take you to her right now.” He seems relieved, but I am anything but.

“Wonderful! Tell me the name, Miss Aguillon, and you shall be on your way.” He brightens up so quickly that it almost feels like a ruse but I am too relieved to do anything but tell him the name.

“Lorraine Badeux, she’s a witch. She lives down by the forest and apothecary.” Pierre turns and fires off orders to members of the Watch to get her, but makes no move to let me go.

“Can I leave the cell, Mayor?” I ask after he stands awkwardly, watching me.

“Oh! No, not yet, Miss Aguillon. You will be on your way, but not yet, not yet.” His smile wavers and I realize he isn’t truly going to let me go. I would be on my way, but not back home.

Turning back, I stare at the sole window in the room. It was up too high for me to even think about escaping, and was barely even an inch wide. I must have been staring half an hour, because the next thing I knew I heard shrieking outside.

“Let me go!” A vicious voice screamed. The melody in the voice was long gone, replaced with venom. Lorraine. They caught her, and now she was going to die, all because of me. She gets thrown in the cell with me, but I can’t even look at her without the guilt overwhelming me. Lorraine was kind to me, taught me magic. And this was how I would repay her? By damning her to death? That wasn’t the person I wanted to be, but it was the person I became anyway.

I sit in a corner, curling into myself. I could feel her burning gaze, but there was no way I could ever meet it. I was a coward, through and through. And now I’ve dragged someone down with me.

“So, what?” I hear her taunt. “Are you really going to say nothing, *traîtresse*?” The clack of her chains echoes through the small room, filling the silence I was not willing to break. “Helene, come *on*! Don’t play stupid, I know you told them what I was. I want to know why.” Her voice falls at the end, and I realize this was more than just a simple betrayal to her. She thought she could trust me with her secret, but I destroyed it.

Her words bring a fresh wave of shame down on me. She wanted answers, and it was the least I could do to even try to make things better. “Someone was there with us, last night. They saw me do magic, and told Mayor Pierre. I was dragged out of bed this morning, and thrown in here. They threatened to kill Mama and Raphael if I didn’t die.” My voice breaks at the end and I burst out in tears without meaning to. “I’m sorry, I’m so, so, sorry, Lorraine. This is all my fault.”

Her face softens just barely, and I go on with my apology. “I would do it all differently, if I was able to go back. I’m sorry.” My eyes shut as I feel a gentle hand wiping away the tears. Then, a soft pair of lips on my forehead.

“Do not cry, Helene.” She whispers against my forehead. “For you are named after the lovely Helen of Troy. And her beauty was too great for tears to fall upon, just like yours.”

My eyes flutter open, and I pull Lorraine into a tight hug. “Thank you,” I whispered against her raven hair. “But what do we do now?”

Her voice erases all evidence of venom, and is back to the honey sweet melody it once was. “We escape.”

For the rest of the time spent in the cell, we remain silent, and I plot a plan to escape. I can only hope that when the time comes, it will work.

The sun sets by the time Mayor Pierre arrives again. “Miss Aguillon, Miss Badeux. I hope you are ready to pay for your heinous crimes.” His voice wavers slightly as he wipes his brow. He relaxes once he sees the iron chains around our wrists and ankles. “It’s not like you have much of a choice, of course. Guards-” He starts. Before he finishes, the door is open and the Watch drags me and Lorraine out into the hall. They’re rough, and my wrists burn from the chains wrapped around them.

It feels like no time at all, but we arrive at the square and get tied into the poles, kindling at our feet. It brings me back to images from yesterday, seeing the girl burn to death. I shudder, but the Watch officer takes that as me trying to escape and tightens it too much to breathe. I feel

like a fish, gasping for air. Lorraine looks over and sends encouraging glances. "It's ok, Helene. I'm here." But even her eyes are wide and terrified.

Too soon, Pierre begins talking to the crowd that has gathered around. My mother is in the front, hatred painting her face. "Today, we have not one, but two witches. They have been consorting with the devil right under our noses, and today we punish them for their crimes." The cheers that come from the crowd are deafening. Even my mother pumps her fist into the air, betrayal glittering in her glistening eyes.

Just yesterday, she was still my mother, my Mama. But now, I cannot recognize the woman in front of me. I cannot recall the woman who tucked me into bed, love radiating from every smile.

"I am here to tell you, no, show you, that in our beautiful town we do not tolerate wickedness. Their lives will be forfeit as punishment for their crimes." He raises his fist into the air, continuing on. "Should they live, anyone and everyone in our town is welcome to attack and kill them on sight. Should they die, they are innocent."

It was painful to see everyone agree with such a terrible idea. Would my mother weep, when I died? Or would she be relieved to have a dead daughter accused of witchcraft?

Pierre throws a flame on the kindling at our feet. My breath catches as the flames grow from an ember. I can already feel the burning heat. And it's time to go forward with the plan.

It was simple, really. But only in theory. I would divert the flames from Lorraine, hiding her with a column of smoke and give her the chance to escape. But when I start, it's much harder than I thought it would be. *Just like the flowers*, I think to myself. *Force it to move*. Lorraine gapes at me as the flames slowly twist away from her.

"What are you doing?" She cries out.

"Go!" I scream back at her. She takes out her hidden knife, cutting through the ropes that tied her in place. She hesitates when she comes behind me.

"No, Lorraine. Go. Leave me be!"

She listens after hesitating for almost too long and takes off running to the woods. I hold the flames at bay until I can't see her charred dress anymore. It may be the end of my story, but it's not the end of Lorraine's. I let the tenuous hold I have on the magic go. Slowly, the flames return to their normal pace. They grew faster than I thought they would. The reds and oranges and yellows flicker and rise until I can barely see anything at all. It feels like a gift, to not have to look my killers in the eyes as I die. Until a sharp, prickly feeling crawls up my legs. Looking down, I see the flames higher than I thought they would be. Slowly, I let go. Slowly, I let the sensations take over.

I feel the flames lick my skirts, slowly but surely charring my skin.

I feel my throat burn as the screams that leave me echo in the air.

I feel the pain course through me as the flames grow in size. I cannot see my mother anymore.

I can no longer feel anything when darkness steals me away.

"I love you, Mama."

