

A Witch's Apprentice  
by James Thomasos

Year 15

A Chore Girl Called Nova

"Nova...!~" Ack. Sounds like I'm in trouble.

"Yes, Hushpuppy?" I called back to her, closing the book I'd nearly completed. I'd have to come back to it in a few hours depending on how this conversation went. I started to wrack my brain for what she could possibly be upset about, but stopped myself. It was either going to be something super serious or something completely silly and mundane; there was no middle ground with her. I looked up from the desk and spun in my chair to face her as she entered from the room. Looking her up and down, she was covered from tip of her hat to tip of her bare, long pointy toes in what appeared to be ashes.

"..." We kinda just looked at each other for a few seconds. Then Hushpuppy took a steadying breath and asked me, "Nova. Why is the Sepulcher... *full of dust?*" Oh crap. The Sepulcher was one of those *wrong* places where Hushpuppy sent people who upset her. In this case, it was actually the default setting for where the front door took you if you didn't knock before entering. As far as I understood, it was a giant hole of sorts deep-deep-**deep** underground with no inlet or outlet and was Hushpuppy's favourite place to leave people who tried to steal from her.

You'd really think people would know better than to rob a Witch Called Hushpuppy at this point.

"Ooooooh. Yeah... uh, **that**. Sooooo... *lately* I've been 'shoomping' all the dust I gather every day with my Ability into the Sepulcher." I would just kinda carefully open the door without knocking from the inside, hold my hand out just shy of the threshold and launch the balls of gunk I had psionically gathered through the doorway and shut the door.

"Nova... Define '*lately*'."

"Ummmm... I'd have to say every day since my Ability developed so... 5... years?" I kinda looked off to the side and muttered the last word.

"..."

"..." Oh boy, she-

"**Why?!**" She had her hands open and out to the side, palms facing me in the universal 'what-the-actual-crap' gesture.

"Well, I *had* to put it all somewhere!"

"...???? Just put it *outside!*"

"But that would be littering!"

“That- would- **what?! One: who cares!?** And two: dust comes from outside, so you’re just putting it back where it belongs!”

“I... hmm. You know... but- hmm.” I wanted to argue with her, but I actually couldn’t wrap my head around my own logic for why I **shouldn’t** just put the dust outside. I think somewhere along the way I had just decided that all the dust had to go somewhere *specific*.

“Hmm. Yeah I guess you’re right. I can move the dust out of there probably if you want, but I might accidentally pick up some *wrong* stuff. Can I even move *wrong* stuff out of *wrong* places?”

“No, no. It’s fine. It’s fine. **It’s fine**. Just put it *outside* from now on. Also clean me up.” I held out my left hand and activated my Ability: *Dust Bunny*. There was a pulse of PsyEn that ran down the hall, making me aware of all of the dust present, and then SHOOMP, all the dust on Hushpuppy and that had tracked in the hall gathered in a ball a few centimeters from my hand. I walked over to the front door, knocked before opening it to the outside, and SHOOMPing it into the sky. I guess that works too, I thought to myself as I watched it scatter into the Wind. I guess that works too... but...

“Hushpuppy... what were you doing *in* the Sepulcher?”

“I didn’t go **in**, some idiots tried to rob me on my way home.”

“Whaaat...” By the Four, it’s *really* not hard to tell Hushpuppy is a Witch! Why would some normies ever think they could handle a freaking *Witch*.

“Right? I was all like, ‘Are you sure about this?’ and they were all like ‘Shut up and take us to your magic house!’ and I was like ‘Okie dokie!’ and then... well, you know how that song and dance goes. I opened the door, they went to peek inside and I pushed them in.”

“...And then...?”

“And then POOF! A whole **cloud** of dust puffed out of The Sepulcher!!! Right in my face and all over my clothes and everything!”

“I see...” Hmm. That probably means they suffocated. While I imagine that to be very unpleasant, at *least* it’s faster than the usual ‘sit-in-complete-darkness-and-starve-to-death’ thing that she usually does to people.

“Anyhow, about that... I’m preeeeeeeeetty sure those guys maybe probably *definitely* lived in this city.”

“So we’re gonna leave?”

“Yeah... we’re gonna leave.”

I guess that works. A bit early though, don’t you think? We usually don’t leave towns til like... Earth 1.” We still had a month and a half to go or so.

“Yah, but if we leave now we can reach Okairos just before Harvest time.”

“Okairos... Okairos... OH! Solona, I think it’s called now.” Her memory was a fickle thing indeed. She only ever seemed to internalize whatever name a place had the *first* time she went there, “I’ve heard of Solona. It’s that big town with the super big and fancy farmer’s market, right!?”

“Yeah whatever dumb name they’re calling it now, Okairos does indeed have quite the famous farmer’s market. Fresh ingredients of a phenomenally wide range, I had many tasty dishes there. I would like you to learn to make all of them.”

And the truth emerges.

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We left Iarnis to head to Solona in mid-summer - like, **exactly** mid-Summer: as in Fire Month 2, Day 14 - and had been on the road for about a week now. Which didn’t mean all that much in terms of comfort. Whenever I get tired - because she really doesn’t - we just find us a fairly flat piece of ground, pull out the house and get set up for the night. I wash up, make some food, read for a bit, then go to sleep; it’s pretty much like any other day. Then in the morning or the night or whenever I’m awake, we head back out.

Easy peasy.

Things had gotten decidedly easier earlier this morning when I opened the door to take in the morning air and saw a large, magirradiated wolf sniffing around our house. It was probably about two stallions nose to butt long and just as tall.

I closed the door and called for Hushpuppy, asking if we could ride it to accelerate the rest of our trip. After a few moments of deliberation, she had decided that she did indeed want to make it to our destination before the coming harvest. She walked outside with a collar in one hand and the small, meter long staff that she would sometimes attach her kama to. The beast growled at her menacingly as she made her barefoot approach. When it leapt for her - maw wide open - she simply jammed her staff into its maw vertically as it closed. Rather than breaking like it really seemed like it should have, the staff stayed put and the beast began to whimper, realizing how vulnerable it was with its mouth stuck like this. Before it had a chance to run off, Hushpuppy stepped around to the side and slapped the collar onto the beast.

She stepped back and put her hands on her hips, “There we go. Pets wear collars. If you wear a collar, you are a pet. And if you’re a pet, you have to do as I say!” After packing the house back into the wardrobe and making it float, we hopped on the wolf and ran up and down the hills of the countryside, staying off of the main road. Not out of any fear, only because we *could* without encountering any Fae problems; Fae tended to avoid Witches, after all.

Oh!

“Hushpuppy, look! A bank!” We were approaching a fairly large lake, when I spotted a small group of swans near the lake’s edge, right in our apparent path.

“Hmm? So it is. We’ll go around the long way, then.” ???

"What?? Why? They're just swans you weirdo. They're pretty!"

"Let's buy you an ornithology book in the next city. Suffice to say, a swan does not know what a mercy kill is." Hushpuppy has always had incredibly specific and sinister hangups concerning extremely mundane animals and plants.

"...Oka- you know what? *No*. Let's walk by the swans. They're pretty and between the two of us we can handle ourselves. Also we're riding a giant wolf, we **aren't** afraid of swans!"

"**You** aren't afraid *enough* of swans. But very well. Have it your way, child."

We slowed the wolf down as we came near the swans and passed by them without incident. They were super pretty up close and when they started to look at us as a group, a single growl from the magirradiated wolf sent them scattering. I tapped Hushpuppy's shoulder and she looked over it to see my 'I told ya so' face. She rolled her black and blue eyes at me before turning around and continuing forward. Hah! I totally won today!

### A Witch Called Hushpuppy

Ah yes. Finally finished the boring stuff.

I entered Okairos - or, Solona, I guess - with Nova earlier this afternoon and met with some mayor-types and merchant-types to hash out some basic agreements and 'rules'. We got permission to-

Oof, I'm a bit hungry... But Nova isn't back from the market quite yet.

Ah! We have a thing for situations like this! I went into the kitchen and looked around until I found a note from Nova:

*There's a bunch of fruit in the Time-Out Box.  
Eat that if you get hungry before I get back.  
-Nova*

Perfect!

I went and opened the Time-Out Box - a box I made where time doesn't pass - and saw that there was indeed a bunch of fruit on the left side. On the right side of course was my emergency food in the form of a small fairy in a glass bird cage. I kept it invisible so Nova didn't accidentally use it like a regular ingredient.

"Kill me." It said.

"Later." I replied, gathering a bunch of fruit in my hands before shutting the box with my foot.

Anyhow, we got permission to set ourselves up on a hill just to the North of the city; which we had predicted would happen. You see, Nova - clever child that she is - pointed out that Okai-Solona in the present day was actually very close to an encroaching Fae Magirradiated Zone. Just shy of 150 kilometers - give or take 50 - North of the city, the borders of non-Human

habitable territory had been fairly stable for a decade or so now, but the leaders of this were still pretty nervous about any wandering Fae or the appearance of a Fae Mound. However, the Fae tend to avoid regions that Witches call home, since we are one of their few natural predators. For some reason they'd rather throw themselves on the Meteoric Iron blades of Human military forces than throw themselves into my mouth.

How selfish.

There were two knocks plus another on the front door and Nova walked in with a large basket strapped to her back that was full of different smells. Even when it was called Okairos, its markets were well known for their high quality. I was very much looking forward to what Nova would be able to put together with access to such goods.

"I'm home!" She called out as she walked across the storefront to the kitchen.

"Ah perfect. I fear this fruit won't hold me for long, child."

"Hushpuppy! You're supposed to say 'Welcome home!' when I say 'I'm home!' We've been over this!" She scolded me as she unpacked various goods onto various shelves and into the Time-Out Box.

"Every time?"

"*Every time!*"

"Huh," That seemed tiresome, "Welcome home, then. When will dinner be ready."

"Well... I don't exactly have anything in mind that's super fast. Shortest thing would be a couple hours at least."

"That's... long, no?"

"It's pretty long, yeah. And I'm pretty hungry myself. Since we just got here, why don't we go out to eat?"

"That will be faster?"

"Likely."

"Then let's go."

"W-wait! I want to wash up really quick if I'm gonna go to a restaurant!" Cleaning up to eat, again? I do not understand this child, "Why don't you decide which place we're gonna eat at while you wait? Oh, do you smell like blood right now? Make sure you don't!" She called to me from her room down the hall as she rummaged around.

"Ugh **fine**. Very well then. Be quick!"

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We exited the storefront directly into a tavern inside the city. Which the authorities would probably consider some kind of security risk but... who's gonna stop me, exactly? We were greeted by a rapidly achieved, stunned silence. The room was pretty full, with some people paused mid-spoonful or mid-swig. Mouths were open, some empty and some full of food.

"So..." I began, but just as I was about to tell everyone to just keep eating and get me some food, Nova stepped out from behind me and stood in front of me.

"Um. Hi everyone! I'm Nova and behind me is a Witch Called Hushpuppy, from 'Hushpuppy's Traveling House of Strange and Wonderful and Terrible and Useful Goods. Wow that is a *long* name and I'm only now realizing it, haha. I recognize two or three of you from the market district from earlier today so... Thank you so much for the deals! Um, anyhow, well, we're just here to eat and probably drink too! So no need to worry! Keep eating and drinking! Um. Thanks!"

This little speech of her's seemed to work, since a quiet hum of activity returned to the room. I grinned down at the precocious child before me who led the way towards an empty table near the bar. We sat down and a waiter *immediately* appeared to take our order, which was just damn good service if you ask me. We made our orders after briefly perusing the menu and the server scampered off, leaving me and Nova at the table.

She suddenly stood up, twirled once, and put her arms out wide, "You didn't look before! Do you like it?"

"Your arms?" I considered them intently, but honestly nothing about Human biology was appetizing to me in the least.

"My outfit!!!"

"Oh," It was a black vest with gold trim and a long pleated black skirt. Pretty much the same outfit she puts me in whenever we go to a Witch's Tea Party, "It's like mine. Was that intentional, I wonder?"

"Duh, of course it was! I thought it might be nice to have some similar outfits! It'd be like a uniform for the shop." She sat back down and started fiddling with her utensils.

"Is that a thing in shops these days?"

"The bigger ones for sure. Kinda like how wait staff tend to wear similar colour schemes!"

"Ooooooh. So that *isn't* coincidental. Fascinating."

"I guess? Hey Hushpuppy, are you really going to prowl around for Fae every day? I was surprised that you agreed to that when the mayor requested it during that meeting earlier."

"Eh, probably. It's about time I ate another one." The Fae were the only actual nutrition that could sustain the Soul of a Witch like me. Everything else was just for the yums.

"I mean, that's a *pretty good* deed. You sure you're an ~~eeeeevil~~ Witch?" She was grinning at me over her glass of water. I do believe this child is mocking me.

"One cannot be good or evil or gentle or cruel *all* the time. Even immortals cannot occupy a steady state for terribly long. Anyhow, if I eat a few Fae, word will likely spread North and things may slow down up there. Then we get to do more of whatever we want unmolested. It's two cocks with a hammer."

She chortled and water dribbled from her lips, "Phrasing... Hushpuppy... and it's two **birds**... with one stone!" She sputtered between waterlogged coughs. After she was finished with whatever line of thought she was amusing herself with, she returned to her usual curiosities, "On the topic of eating Fae, there something I've been wondering about for a while. How come you always eat Fae *alive*. I get why you don't use Meteoric Iron on them, since you're Fae-ish yourself, but why do they need to be alive?"

"Well, do you know what Meteoric Iron actually does to a Fae?"

"It... robs them of their Magic? That's why it's the only way to kill them!"

"Yes and no. You see steel or PsyMetal *can* cut a Fae... you might even be able to kill it if you're thorough enough. But then that Fae's Soul and Memories and Experiences just go back into the collective shared mind that all Fae can tap into. Each one you kill in a brand new way just makes the rest of them smarter and stronger... with two exceptions."

"Two?"

"Yeah, Meteoric Iron of course comes from outside of the planet and is completely devoid of Magic. Magic is derived from *Soul*, so Meteoric Iron devours a Fae's *Soul*."

"And the other is... Teeth? Then?"

"Exactly. So you get it now?"

"Yeah I think so. Teeth and Meteoric Iron can drink in *Soul*. Which is what you're sustaining on. So you couldn't use both and still get the nutrition you need."

"Very good. Such a smart girl." She's passed Metaphysics 101 with Hushpuppy. I'm such a good teacher, "Moving on. Do you see how those small gents are looking at you?" There was a group of young boys at a corner booth across the way, whispering and obviously looking at Nova.

"Hushpuppy, there is **no** way anyone in here is looking at anyone but **you**. I just happen to be near you."

"Huh, that so? Well they are much too young."

"Too young... Wait, do you even...? Actually nevermind I don't really wanna know... Anyhow, I don't know if the one who murdered both my parents would be a good measure of what is and isn't dangerous to me!"

"Ha! One would think that'd practically make me an expert! Oh look, food!" The waiter had arrived sometime during the end of our conversation with a face full of various

misunderstandings and probably more than a few understandings. I showed him my many sharp teeth so that he knew I was ready to eat and dug in before he finished serving Nova.

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### Nova

"I'm going for a walk. Close down the shop and go do young human things." Hushpuppy had said that super early one morning.

It had been several weeks now since we had arrived in Solona. Now when Hushpuppy says she is 'going for a walk' what she actually means is: 'I'm going to go find some Fae and eat them.' Which was part of the deal for us setting up where we are currently living. After all, having a Witch in the general vicinity did **a lot** to make normally aggressive Fae *much* more hesitant. Losing a fight with a human was one thing... but getting eaten alive by a Witch was a way scarier fate for sure.

Even 11 years later, I hadn't really gotten used to what it sounds like.

What was particularly rare about this situation is that she was both going for a walk *and* giving me the day off. That really didn't happen all that often, so I was taking full advantage of it. I picked out a nice soft pink sweater that was just a smidge too big, some loose, lightweight grey pants that were just a smidge too short, and some pointy white shoes over some black socks! To top it all off I wrapped myself with a light pink scarf. Finally, I picked out a small dark grey purse and took some money out of the box that always seemed full and only I could open.

This was totally fashionable in the last place I lived, I swear!

On my way out, I grabbed a book from the recently formed library wing of our house - *Faux Shadowing*, by Salaria Vaugh - and went to a quiet cafe with outdoor seating in the town square of Solona called The Cat Corner. I sat down, ordered some super fancy caffeinated beverage, and read in the late morning sun and breeze.

It was a really nice morning!

I had been eyeing this place the last few times I had come into town for ingredients; there were a lot of other teenagers who hung around here, so of course I was curious! Currently there was a group of girls that seemed like they were my age were whispering all excited about something... actually they seemed to be talking about me. As I looked back at them, they looked away and kinda huddled in at their table to whisper about something. Hmm, I thought maybe they'd approach me, but maybe I should approach them instead?

Well, it **is** my day off, after all!

I closed my book, left my payment on the table, and approached the girls at their table. This seemed to surprise them considerably because they didn't seem to know what to say. That made things particularly awkward, since I only remembered once I was standing over them at

their table that... I'd only ever really approached other kids in a school setting before. I didn't often interact with anyone who wasn't an adult I was engaging in some kind of transaction with.

Uhhh...

"Um...Hi?" Oh thank the Four someone spoke. The one who greeted me with one eyebrow raised was a girl with olive-toned skin and curly black hair. She had a cute black, hooded sweater on and a violet stuck in her hair.

"H-hello! I... saw you three talking over here and... I'm sorta new to town I guess... and it's my day off... and..." Yikes, why am I so nervous? I've spoken to Meverastethin before! They're like the most powerful creature *ever*, "... could I maybe join you?" The girl in the black hoodie glanced at her friends, a couple of darker skinned girls with super curly hair and stylish dresses; they seemed to be sisters. They just shrugged back at the girl with the black hoodie.

"...Sure..." They sort of scooted their chairs closer together around the circular table and I pulled up a chair to sit down. I honestly hadn't expected to get *this* far with my approach here. Sometimes when I tried to approach people nonchalantly whenever I did school things, other kids got a bit put off. But these three didn't seem particularly malicious or anything, maybe they were curious?

"So...-" I began quietly, but got cut off by one of the girls in dresses blurting out, "Are you really the Witch-girl!?!?"

"Saya!" The girl in the black hoodie whispered harshly, mortified. The other girl in the dress simply laughed.

"*What*. She came up to us after all! Sooooo?"

"I... guess? I mean. I'm **not** a Witch, but I am a girl. But I do work for a Witch and live with a Witch... so maybe that's what you mean? Oh! My name is Nova, by the way!" 'Saya' seemed somewhat bewildered at my rather meandering response. They all exchanged glances and had themselves a shared giggle that I didn't really understand.

"I'm Ari." The girl in the black hoodie waved.

"Mia here!" Piped in the girl in the dress that wasn't Saya.

"And as you heard before, Saya."

"Nice to meet you! So what do you guys do around here?"

"What do we do...? I guess... School and hangout and occasionally help out at home?" Wow, Ari doesn't have to work a regularly scheduled job? That's pretty cool... imagine how many books she could read!

"We help out on the family farm a little bit to the South, but Saya and I come into the city for our PsyEn Basic Training and other school stuff." Mia and Saya were farmers... awesome! I wonder

if I bought ingredients from their parents? I'll have to check around for that next time I go to the farmer's market!

"So... What is it like? Living with a Witch? How did that even happen?" Ari finally broke and asked me what was clearly on everyone's minds, since the other two were nodding enthusiastically as she asked.

"Oh, well. Hushpuppy - that's 'the Witch's' name - ki-mu- uh, *took me in* like... 11ish years ago now after she- er, well, I mean- after my mother... *died*." There was a small chorus of 'Oh no's and 'I'm so sorry's.

"It's okay though. Hushpuppy has been really good to me and-"

"Have you ever seen her... you know..." Saya leaned in and started whispering, "...*eat a person?*!"

"Well-" I began and saw their eyes begin to widen, I continued hurriedly, "Not a **person**! She says she doesn't see the appeal! I *have* seen her eat Fae though. That's probably what she's doing now, actually."

""Woow..." They were all suitably impressed, "So then... what my dad said is true, then? That the Witch is *really* here to feed on Fairies? And that running a store is actually just a front?" I feel like Ari just said something suuuper offensive.

"No way! Our shop is freaking awesome! We have all sorts of cool stuff," I whipped my head around until I found a set of pink flowers strung up along the rafters of a building and pointed at them, "You see those flowers? Hushpuppy has been wandering around all the Human territories for *centuries*, selling those to people so they can chase away the dark!" I left out the little detail where she hates those things and can't figure out how to *not* grow them.

"Oh- I- I'm so-" Ari began to stammer.

"-WAIT! So those things really **ARE** Witch flowers?! I thought that was just supposed to be a cute name!"

"Nope! They aren't just *any* Witch flowers! They are *Hushpuppy Flowers*!" I puffed my chest out braggadociously.

"Maybe... we could check out the store?"

""Mia?!"

"What?! Wouldn't it be a cool story!? If Nova is there, then we'd be fine! Right, Nova?"

"Sure!"

"What other kinds of things do you two sell?!" I felt my smile get much wider.

Now *this* was my kind of conversation!

Year 16

Hushpuppy

Ah. I just remembered something.

Today is '*Big Cake Day*'.

What's '*Big Cake Day*'?

It's the day of the year when Nova makes a *big cake*, obviously. She's been doing it for a while, so I totally remember: it's always right at the beginning of Harvest season, which is Earth 1... and the Day is... *today*. So that's Day 12. Earth 1 Day 12. But she doesn't make the *big cake* to greet the coming Harvest, but she makes it as a sort of greeting from her past self to her future self. In other words, she always uses a *big cake* to celebrate the day she was allegedly born.

Now I remember every *big cake* she ever made because they've gotten better each time. I recall that when I acquired her, she had seen four Winters at that point. Now if she has made a *big cake* every year since she was four... and if she makes a *big cake* today... Then today would be the 12th *big cake* that she's made.

So I guess that makes her 16 years old today?

Woow, how old was *I* when I picked her up? How old am I now even? Eh, questions for later.

She always makes a *big cake* and **both** of us eat it. As ever, I eat more than her.

Hmm. I guess I should make something for her, then, right?

I mean it's only fair... but what to make?

She's been really very useful to me over the last 12ish years, so I should make something useful. Yeah, that seems practical. Having decided roughly what I was going to make for her, I decided to go wake her up. She'd been sleeping a lot in recent years and I had to wonder if it was a small Human developmental thing or maybe she was working too much.

I opened the front door and entered Nova's room from her closet, closing the door behind me. She didn't stir... hahhhh such a smol, languid Human she is!

"Nooooova... Nooooooooooooova.~" Her eyes opened slowly and she sat up all groggy-like.

"...What... time is it?"

"Eh, I dunno. Get up and get dressed, we're gonna go get something."

"...Something?"

"Yeah I need the Heart of a Mountain for a... thing. It'll be a quick adventure for sure."

“The... Heart of... you know what? Nevermind... Gimme like... how long it takes you to eat two chicken sandwiches.” Ah, such a speedy child! I went to wait in the storefront, sitting on the front desk and kicking my feet in the air as I imagined eating two chicken sandwiches. By the time I finished picturing that specific act of consumption, I heard Nova exit the kitchen as her little footsteps tip-tapped down the hall. She came into the storefront carrying a big backpack that smelled like snacks and wearing a little black leather jacket, brown pants with many pockets, and some black boots. The young one was - as ever - well prepared.

Though I never did manage to convince her of the wonders of the barefoot life.

“I’m ready.” She said with a yawn.

“Good, let’s go!” I tapped on the door with a single finger and we went through.

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It was just after daybreak when we began our ascent up a mountain range near the Western border between the Human and Fekthal territories. Nova was *finally* awake enough to be her usual chatty self. Which was good, since I had kinda gotten used to her incessant chatter.

“...So... The Heart of a Mountain is for... what exactly? As far as ingredients for a magical... *thing* goes, this seems pretty abstract, even for you.”

“Well... what sort of properties do you think the Heart of a Mountain might have?” This seemed like a good teachable moment.

“Um... It would be sturdy?”

“Not just ‘sturdy’... the **most** sturdy! You could make all sorts of things if you had the sturdiest of all materials!”

“Like what?”

“You’ll see!” She’s gonna be soooo surprised!

“...Okay... are we really gonna climb this *entire* mountain? Is this gonna take all day?”

“It shouldn’t. But we started early just in case.” She’s probably worried about having time to make a *big cake*. Pfft, like I would keep us out so late that we wouldn’t be able to make and eat a *big cake*.

“That’s good I guess.” She trotted up next to me and I felt the telltale tingle of the PsyEn Pulse that preceded her activating her Ability. I watched her as we walked: there was sand and dirt swirling into different writhing shapes of shmootz above her hand... hmm, both of her hands actually.

When had she learned to dual wield her Ability?

“...That seems fancy.” She startled a tad at my comment.

“Oh! Um, this? You’re... interested?”

“Duh. It’s part of what makes you such an efficient employee! From what Viktor told me the first time you cleaned their domain, there seems to be no limit to the amount of dust you can pull in!”

“I guess... But there is the limit of the size of the door that I can fit it through. Ugh... the first time dusting each of their abodes...” She made a retching sound and I laughed; I definitely had the cleanest domain of *any* Witch.

“But... that’s sand and dirt, right? I thought you could only pick up *dust*.”

“I mean, I thought so too. But you said it yourself, right? That dust comes from outside. That’s probably mostly true. Which means that some amount of the dust in our house is dirt and sand.”

“Huh. That’s neat.” I do seem to faintly recall that Human PsyEn Abilities can evolve as their understanding of said Ability’s inner workings increase.

“Yeah. It only occurred to me when you said something about it last year that when my Ability first developed, I ran outside to use it and gave myself a headache. There was too much information when I Pulsed without any set limitations. Which means that the detection part of my Ability was recognizing the dirt on the ground as something I could ‘shoomp’ in.” Wooow. Listen to her! She almost sounds like an adult Human talking about her Ability like this.

When did she grow up so much?

“Hushpuppy?”

“Hmm?”

“Is this the place?”

“Oh! Yeah this should work. Here take this.” I reached into my hat and pulled out a couple of jars of black paint for this exact sort of situation.

“Um...?”

“I need you to paint a big semi-circle. Like flat on the bottom and curved on the top and big enough for us both to walk all comfy-like.” I pointed at a sheer, stone cliff face we had come up to on a small plateau of sorts about a third the way up the mountain.

“Er... ooookay then!” She followed her orders diligently and effectively, painting a tunnel mouth on the side of the mountain. Once she completed her task, the paint did not take terribly long to dry. We stood in front of the painted hole and I put my hands against it. It was still solid.

“Hmm. What colour do you think the Heart of a Mountain is?”

“Ummm, well the Human heart and blood are red, right? But your blood is black... So I guess we should just go with earthy colours?”

“Yeah I guess it only sort of matters,” I turned and grabbed Nova’s shoulders, forcing her to face towards me.

“Wha-” She began, but I shushed her. Hmm... Yeah. I guess a deep gold would fit best; that makes extra sense for a merchant too. Good fortune and what not. I reached into my hat once more and pulled out a little jar full of gold dust. Nova looked on curiously as I poured a bit of it out into my hand and told it to melt. The now liquid gold was shiny and pretty cupped in my hand and - with an affirmative nod to myself - I slapped the small bit of gold a little bit above the exact center of the not-tunnel entrance. The gold quickly solidified, shimmered, then became dull and seemingly distant.

“Alright, ready?”

“Ready!”

We walked forward where there was once sheer rock covered in black paint. We continued past the previously solid threshold into the now functional tunnel that would take us all the way to the Heart of the Mountain.

“Hushpuppy? Can you make some light? I seriously can’t see.” Oh. Right. Human eyes are *useless* in the dark, I keep forgetting about that. I looked back towards the entrance and cupped my hands over the distant sunlight - as if containing a sphere between my two hands - blocking my vision of dim radiance.

“Hold out your hands.”

“Kaay.” She cupped her hands in front of her as if scooping water and I placed my cupped hands upon her’s before suddenly opening and pulling them back. Sunlight bathed the artificial tunnel as it radiated from a glowing orb of captured sunlight in Nova’s hand, illuminating a widening grin on her face.

“...Awesome! Thank you, Hushpuppy!”

“Mmm. Well, it wouldn’t do to have you tripping and slowing us down, now would it?”

“Yeah~ yeah~ yeah~!” She did not appear to buy my explanation for having indulged her failure of vision. We continued on in the illuminated tunnel for a short while until we reached the chamber containing the Heart of the Mountain. The deep, metallic gold crystalline structure began to pulsate as we approached it. All in all, it wasn’t terribly big - roughly the size of an adult Human male - and we probably wouldn’t need all of it, half of it at most, to contain that which needed to be contained.

“Wow... it’s so pretty! We’re really taking this? How?”

“Magic, duh.” You’d think she’d understand that by now.

“Pfft alright then. What should I do?”

“Why don’t you draw us a nice door?”

“Where?”

“I dunno somewhere we can jump through easily.”

“Kaaay!~” She drawled as she tended to, finding herself a nice rock and loudly scraping chalk-like lines into the stone at our feet. While she was doing that, I approached the Heart of the Mountain, which was beating faster the closer I got to it.

How flighty, for a mountain, anyhow.

“Now you don’t have to give me your whole heart, since we just met and all. But since we are already inside of you, there is no way we can pull out without taking a piece of you with us, don’t you think?” I spoke to the heart as I held out both my hands to it, willing it to give itself up. The heart began to hum as the Magic began to act on it.

I heard Nova snickering in the background, “By the Four! *Phrasing*, Hushpuppy!”

“Not now, child.” I chided her as the humming grew louder and louder. ‘Phrasing’ was her new favourite admonishment that she’d picked up ever since she started hanging out with those local scamps at the cafe that she seemed to enjoy. Suddenly, there was a cracking noise and all the sound within the mountain ceased at once. Three chunks roughly the size of my head broke cleanly off of the Heart of the Mountain. Yes, this would do nicely I decided as I pulled out a bag and allowed the chunks of the Heart to settle themselves in comfortably.

Nice and easy.

Or at least I thought so until the rumbling started.

“Uh... Hushpuppy?”

“Damn. Is that door finished?”

“No! It’s hard to scrape clean lines onto stone with stone!” Damn. Damn-Damn-Damn. Do we go back out the way we came? I looked down the tunnel, but there was no longer any light at the end of it. I understood the meaning of the three chunks now, the Mountain’s Heart broke because it knew it had to bury us so that we could be together.

I underestimated this mountain’s flighty heart.

I threw myself onto my hands and knees next to Nova and started helping her finish the doorway. Using my finger to carve the lines in was much more expedient... I should have secured our exit before taking the Mountain’s Heart. I heard the chamber above us starting to crumble.

“No-no-no-no-” Nova was starting to panic.

“-**Move**.” I pushed her out of the way. If I use two hands I might just barely be able to get her through the door before-

**“ABOVE!”** Even as my hands still moved, finishing the rectangle of the door and moving to draw the door handle, I could hear that it was too late. There was a yelp from Nova and I felt the tickling of her PsyEn pulse, and I turned around to see if there was some way for me to protect her from this cave in...

Only to see Nova doing just that *herself*.

Both of her hands up above her head and the falling debris had halted its descent in mid air, held aloft by Nova’s willpower alone it seemed. More rocks were falling, but when they reached a certain threshold, they stopped too.

“H-how are you...-”

“*Debris... is just... **Big! Dust!***” She managed to squeak out between gasps. Wasting no more time, I finished carving the door handle, pushed the door open into our home, hooked an arm around her waist and dove both of us through the door. With Nova out of physical proximity and danger, the rocks began falling again, but I kicked the door shut as soon as we were safely inside before they could start wrecking my shop.

### Nova

I found myself lying atop Hushpuppy right next to the front door of the shop, clinging to her shirt with plenty of tears in my eyes.

That was really, really, **really scary**.

We seriously almost died there.

I tried to shake off my fried nerves; Hushpuppy would probably scold me if I clung to her for too long. But when I tried to push myself off her, I found that I was still very much stuck in her embrace.

“Um. Hushpuppy. It’s-”

“*Are you okay?*” Woah. She sounds so urgent I actually wondered if maybe I was hurt.

“I-I’m fine. I can’t breathe though...”

“Ah.” She let me go and I sort of jumped away from her, embarrassed. But she was peering at me and crawled over alarmingly fast, “Your nose is bleeding. *Why.*”

“Oh, that... Um... When I push past the detection limit of *Dust Bunny*, it puts a **lot** of strain on my Mind and body... and I get a headache and even sometimes a nose bleed.”

“I’m... sorry,” ?!?!?!? “I... need your help to finish what we started.”

What is **happening** right now!?! She stood up and offered me her hand, which I accepted and let her pull me up. She didn’t let go after I was standing and pulled me gently towards the hall, a large clunking sack in her left hand. Those must be pieces of the Heart of the Mountain... I can’t

believe she managed to get those through as well. We walked past the kitchen and down the hall towards a door at the end of the hall that I *knew* I'd never seen before.

"What is this room?"

"The Armory," We have an Armory apparently, "This is where many of the spoils of conflicts past go. Waste not, after all." She opened the door and led me inside. It wasn't a huge room - about 7x7 meters big - but the left and right walls had shelves that had various objects on top of every single one. The back wall had dozens of weapons mounted to it and many of them were recognizable to me: my mother's sword, the Man Who Called Himself My Father's heavy crossbow and bowblade, and...

"There's a lot of Meteoric Iron in here... How'd *you* even get those in here." Meteoric Iron... Iron that came to our planet from the Magic-less heavens was the most effective way to kill a Fae and - consequently - a Witch.

"With some... Human assistance," She let go of my hand and walked over to one of the shelves, moving stuff around for a bit before grabbing a small wooden box and bringing it back over to me. She opened it and asked, "If your head is okay... can you tell me if this is something you can 'shoomp'?"

My head was still pretty fuzzy, but I was far too curious as to what all of this was about to not give it a try. I activated my Ability with a very concentrated localized pulse towards the open box containing some dark grey and black dust. As the pulse reached it, the dust highlighted in my mind's eye. I nodded at Hushpuppy.

"Good. Pull it all in and hold it out in front of you; orient your palm vertically." SHOOMP, I followed her directions exactly.

"Hushpuppy, what **is** this stuff?"

"Meteoric iron dust."

"**WHAT!**" This stuff could **kill** her!

"Calm down and hold steady." She had pulled out her kama and sliced off the tips of her fingers on her left hand, which simply floated in the air, unperturbed by gravity. She cut off some of her own hair, placed it with her floating finger tips, and then reached forward and sliced a bit of my hair off. Finally, she rose her hands into the air and the three chunks of the Heart of the Mountain began to float in the air. There was a bizarre multi-tonal humming noise as the finger tips began to turn fly through the air in a circle between the three float heart chunks, which themselves were tracing a lazy circle through the air, aligning with the meteoric iron dust that floated several centimeters away from my palm. Finally, she allowed our hair to join in this cyclical flight pattern of seemingly random objects.

"Alright. That should about do it. This will be loud, don't flinch" She said as she turned her palms inward to face each other. She smiled a sharp-toothed grin at me before clapping her hands together with thunderous force. There was a flash of light and a searing hiss as whatever Magic

Hushpuppy was performing collided with the meteoric iron dust that I was holding in place with my own Psychic Energy. I could feel the room slightly trembling as I squeezed my eyes shut against any additional flashes.

“It’s done.” I peeked one eye open then the other and saw that she was holding some kind of pretty, shifting iridescent gold jewel that appeared to contain some writhing, circulating darkness. It hung from a black and blue chain that seemed metallic, despite clearly being made of our hair woven together.

“What... *is* it?”

“It’s for you.” ?!

“It- What!?”

“You know... because like... today... you were born... six...teen(?) years ago.”

...

...

...

Hushpuppy...

Remembered my *birthday*?!?!

Oh come on Nova. Hold it together.

Nope, *that* wasn’t gonna happen. Trembling hands coming up to my mouth as my face involuntarily flushed and scrunched up, I immediately started crying. My vision was too wavy from my tears, but I’m sure Hushpuppy was utterly perplexed.

“...Uh... I mean if you don’t want-”

“I- You- Me- But- I COULDN’T- WE- THANK- HNNNNNG-” I leapt at her and wrapped her in a big hug, gracelessly crying into her chest for like half a minute before regaining some small bit of composure, “Ahem... um... I- this was really unexpected. You’ve never remembered my birthday before... let alone gotten me a present... so... *thank you so much*, Hushpuppy!” I could feel that my face was totally beet red, hopefully she wouldn’t think I was about to catch a fever or something again.

Thankfully, Hushpuppy seemed just as embarrassed by this whole situation, “Well. You’ve been really, uh, great and stuff. Great sales. Great food. Great ideas. An ideal... employee, really. Best I’ve ever had.” God, I’m the *only* employee you’ve ever had you dummy, “But yeah, such performance ought to be rewarded and... you did really well back there.”

She reached out and placed the jewel around my neck, which was a bit long, but it immediately shortened itself to hang the jewel in line with my collarbone. My head was practically on fire from this onslaught of compliments; I still wasn't used to them *at all*.

"Mmm... yeah. Looks good. I'm so good at picking colours..." She congratulated herself out loud and I just giggled at her. She really was so silly, trying to play this off like she *didn't* care. It had been like 12 years since she took me in... she didn't *have* to be as good to me as she had... Really, she didn't **have** to do *any* of this.

"So. Nova. Probably a bit soon to ask this but... you aren't too beat up to make a *big cake* today, are you?" Maybe it was just because I was tired, but laughter erupted right from my belly and I couldn't stop for like 15 seconds. *Big cake!*~ Did she count cakes in order to know how old I was? Actually, you know what, I probably don't want to know.

"Nah, I'm not too tired, c'mon! Let's go to the kitchen!"

Year 17

Hushpuppy

"Hey Hushpuppy, do you think I could become a Witch some day?" Nova asked me all of a sudden one day.

"Sure. But you have to hunt your own Fae, I'm not sharing mine."

"..."

"What."

"...What was **THAT?!**"

"What was *what?*"

"You're supposed to be all 'Oh woe is me, this immortal life is not to be envied' etcetera etcetera! That's how it goes in like... every book about immortals and lesser deities and what not!" She was being all melodramatic, putting her top of her hand to her forehead and leaning herself all the way over the counter to look at me upside down.

"Wat. That's stupid. Being immortal is great; do you know how many different kinds of food I've gotten to eat in the last 200 some-odd years?" Seriously, Humans are wild about this whole mortality thing. Maybe because they're too close to it to see?

"But... I mean... surely you've got like... regrets or something?"

"I guess there *are* things I **could** have eaten, but didn't. And at least one person I should have killed when I had the chance."

"" ... ""

“Don’t give me that look, Nova. Living in a nutshell is *just* the accumulation of memories over time. That’s all it is. Full stop. Regrets are just a specific form of memory. So of course it would hold that by accumulating memories, you are accumulating regrets. And if you live longer, then you accumulate more memories and thus more regrets. So if you live a long time and have a lot of regrets... doesn’t that mean you’re winning at life?”

“I... hmm. Well-”

“Anyhow. It’s funny that you bring that up. I was thinking you should learn how to do some Magic.”

“**Really!?!**” She finally flipped herself over so she was upside up and downside down, propping herself up on her elbows as her feet hung off the back of the front desk.

“Ya. I figured it’s about time. It would really expedite a lot of shopping if you could make your own doors without relying on me or on door charms all the time.”

“T-that would be so freaking cool!!!” Oh my, she’s excited about this. But then suddenly her face dropped, “But like... wouldn’t that be bad for my health? Humans can’t really use Magic safely, can they? I mean I know Magicians and Sorcs are a thing but... doesn’t magirradiation kill them pretty young?”

“Eh we’ll go over that.”

“Uh... No I think I’d really like you not to gloss over-”

“It’s fiiiiiiiiine. There *are* ways to avoid that, especially with a Coating like yours. Here switch one of your eyes with me real quick.”

“Come again?”

“Oh grow up *I’ll give it back!*” You’d think she’d trust me by now, “Come here!” I beckoned her over.

“... Fine. I guess?” She walked over and stood in front of me, looking down at m-

**What.**

I took off my hat and tossed it to the side, flabbergasted. *When?! I mean, How?!.*

“*Why are you taller than me, child?!.*” She had like... a little over 10 centimeters on me!

She had the gall to giggle at me, “You’re just *now* noticing?”

“Ugh, whatever. Gimme your hand!”

“This isn’t gonna hurt, is it?”

“Of course not, close your right eye!” She did so and I reached up - ugh - and put my index finger above and my thumb below her closed eye, my fingertips *just* making contact with her

face. I closed my right eye as well, then brought up my left index finger and poked her nose with it.

“Boop!”

“Hey!-”

“All done, you can open your eye now.” I opened mine as well and she gasped, seeing her own right eye in my right eye socket. My own black and blue eye was in her right eye socket, having switched places temporarily; it would have been rude to leave her with just one eye.

“Good, now do the Third Eye thing and look through your eye over here.”

“...How...”

“If you wanna do Magic you’re gonna have to not ask *that* quite so much and just start *doing* things, you know?” She grumbled a little bit about this but did indeed focus her Psychic Energy as I commanded. I felt an odd tingling in my head as she remotely connected herself to her own eye and I controlled the eye to look at her. I heard a small, sharp intake of air from her as she began to see from *her* eye in *my* head.

“...This is weeeeeiiiiirrrrrddd...” She whispered with a growing smile on her face.

“Yeah sure. Anyhow see your Coating? She how it’s like foggy glass? And not all goopy and what not?”

“...Yeah I guess.”

“It means you’ve adapted to the presence of Magirradiation. Try Reinforcing all the way.” Her Coating twitched and shrunk a bit, but didn’t go all the way in.

“See? It doesn’t go all the way in.”

“Well that’s because I’m bad at Reinforcing.”

“No. You just *can’t*; your Human brain won’t let you pull in the outer layer because it *isn’t* strictly PsyEn anymore. It’s all mucked up by Magic, so it acts as a calcified shell of something that used to be Psychic Energy.”

“...I’ve never heard of anything like that. You *never* care about Psychic Energy, why do you even know about any of this?”

“Eh, ‘cause some researchers *love* monologuing and it seemed important at the time. Anyhow, you’re probably more resistant to Magirradiation than most at this point. So I’ll teach you how to do some Magic, close your eye again - good - Boop!” I switched our eyes back around.

“That’s... really cool actually. I always thought I was just bad at controlling PsyEn.”

“Nah. Yours is just different. Anyhow, we may as well start now: open your Third Eye,” After a moment she nodded at me, “Excellent. Now I’m going to do some Magic, but I want you to keep an eye on me.” Uhh... What should I even do as an example?

Ah, I know!

I reached my hand out towards the kitchen, where there was some meat of some sort hanging to dry and I snatched it. I took the meat - now within my grasp - and tossed it in my mouth before asking her, “What did you see?”

“Your hand glowed and then the air around it got... distorted?”

“Yuuuup. Human Magicians of the past called the part of the body that acts as the bridge between the Magician’s perceived reality and the reality altering nature of Magic a *focal point*. The amount of simultaneous effects you can generate will always be limited to the number of focal points you can maintain. Got it?”

“Um, I guess?”

“Okay cool, you try it then.”

“Try what?”

“...Magic. Duh.”

“You... didn’t teach me anything though?” I literally just did though?

“??? Just like... want something and make it happen.”

“How?! Like... to begin with, does Magic come from *within* or *without*?!”

“Kinda both?”

“...”

“Look if you want a clear cut answer to the nature of things you *really* shouldn’t be trying to learn Magic.” I wonder if this girl would be okay as a Witch. She was just so very... Human. Though I guess I must have been *very Human* at some point too. It’s hard to remember at this point.

“But what about when you tell someone to do something or say something and a thing just happens...?”

“Oh that’s me using my voice as a focal point. I’m very good at that.”

“...But that... the voice isn’t ‘part of the body’ though...” Aw man... this is gonna be a *loooooonnggg* training arc...

“Okay so it isn’t not-”

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## Nova

"Hushpuppy is a **terrible** teacher. Just wow." I repeated a familiar refrain to Ari, Saya, and Mia at our usual table at The Cat Corner Cafe. I was sipping at this frosty, sweet drink while absent-mindedly swirling around a neat looking spiral in my right hand using *Dust Bunny*.

"I mean... yeah it sounds pretty confusing how she only describes anything in terms of what it *isn't*... But - counter point - you're learning fuckin' magic and that's cool as shit." Ari - the de facto group leader - had developed quite the mouth in the last couple of years. But she was sooo pretty that even most adults didn't give her too much flack for it.

"Well, like... the only way she knows how to communicate anything about Magic is to demand I think like her. Which is hard!"

"How do you mean?" Mia offered. This was not the first time they had heard these complaints... but they wanted to hear about my Magic studies so they were humoring my bitching somewhat.

"Well - for example - what is behind that door over there?" I pointed across the town square to the Owl Trap: a fancy inn in the center of town.

"Ummm, I guess... the foyer of the inn?"

**"Wrong!** The answer to what is behind a door is: 'You can't ever *really* know... so it could be **anything**.' What I've come to understand about Hushpuppy's Magic is that it's based entirely around *uncertainty*. As long as she's not sure about the distance between two points, they could *technically* be one step away from each other. Hushpuppy's raw Magical strength and sheer willful ignorance combined were far greater than the petty constraints of reality." They all just kinda looked at me, perplexed.

"That's..." Mia began.

"Dumb." Ari and Saya said in unison. Man... having friends really was awesome. Solona had really grown on me in the last couple of years.

"Exactly. But Magic aside, Ari, I'm a lot more interested in what you were talking about earlier though."

"Huh? Oh! You mean about the flower shop dude's son?"

"Yeah!" I prodded her.

"Hmm? What about him? We made out in the back of the shop 'cause it was warm in there and then I left just before his dad got back from the pub!" She explained casually with a lascivious grin. There was a general tittering around the table and a little bit of teasing at Ari's expense. After a bit, I sighed and swallowed my pride and asked the question that burns in my mind every time this comes up.

"Yeah but... what's *that* like though?"

There was a very, very long pause as I looked at each of my three friends and took in their very different reactions. Ari kinda just tilted her head at me, Saya leaned forward, covering her mouth with her hands as she propped her elbows up on the table. Mia smiled slightly before glancing away bashfully as I made eye contact with her. See, this is why I finally decided to ask about this topic, like... Mia definitely liked me-liked me, right? But as a group we were a tad inseparable.

So I kinda need to know: what do I *do* about this kind of thing!?

Finally - after what felt like several minutes of silence - Saya was the first to speak up, "So Nova... are you saying you've never kissed a guy or girl?"

"Yep." Oh man, this is gonna be super drawn out, isn't it?

"Are you interested in anybody?" Ari piped in.

"Um... specifically? Isn't that a tad personal...?"

"Hah! *Maybe!* Well, do you think anyone is hot?"

"I guess I've thought plenty of people are cute or hot or pretty. But like... everyone gets so weird about *who* I am or my relation to Hushpuppy... Pretty much everyone except you three... which I DO appreciate, by the way." There was a brief pause where Ari and Saya looked at Mia, who despite her darker complexion was definitely visibly blushing. They looked back at me and I braced myself for an onslaught of light teasing. But instead of teasing me about it, Ari and Saya looked at each other and something must have silently passed between the two of them.

"So... *Nova.*"

"So... *Ari?*"

"There is a harvest festival coming up. Food and music and drinks - even for us minors - a plenty and lots of fun to be had. You're familiar, right?"

"Yeah, I've run a stall at it the last couple years since Hushpuppy and I came here."

"Well you should definitely *not* work through the whole damn thing this time, kay? Surely Hushpuppy can run a stall herself without getting into trouble!"

"Eh..." I grimaced facetiously.

"Oh come now, are you her guardian or is she yours?"

"EH..." They got a kick out of that, but continued despite my deflecting jokes.

"So there is gonna be a lot of music and dancing here in the town square, for pretty much *days*. It starts W2D4, SO!" She whipped her head towards Saya and Mia, "**Saya**, I've got just a *ton* of prep work to do the day before and well into the afternoon the day the festival starts." Saya cocked her head slightly, then her eyes widened and she grinned at Ari.

“Oh yes! That... *stuff!* You were gonna need my help with it, right?”

“Uh.. guys-” Mia began.

“*Indeed* Saya, soooo... *Mia*, do you think you could make sure Nova *actually goes* to the harvest festival? You know the fun stuff better than her, so she’s going to need a... learned *escort*, don’tcha think???” What is she *doing*?

“M-me? I mean, I guess- er, yes! Of course! If Nova would have me!” Mia looked back over at me, clearly embarrassed about what was being set up here.

“I think Nova would love to *have* you, right Nova? After all, Nova wouldn’t let Mia go to the start of the festival *alone*... *right Nova?!*” Ari could barely contain her glee at what she and Saya were doing here.

“R-right. I’ll talk to Hushpuppy, it’ll probably be fine.

Honestly, I was a tad thankful that everyone seemed to be weirdly cool with this situation. I don’t attend school anymore; my Coating is too weird for the average Human to help me utilize it... And other than that... I can do math and read just fine. But I kinda underestimated how much I was missing out on socially. I had read in a lot of books that group dynamics could get really weird if you inserted romance into them.

And it’s not like I was *uninterested* in Mia. She - just like the other two - was super pretty... and she *liked me*.

“Excellent. Let’s split off for now. I need to actually run some of these errands and get home before I get chewed out again. Festival is in a few days, so let’s meet up then.” Ari - as usual - called the end of our little hangout and we said our goodbyes and went our separate ways. I walked about the town with a bubbling giddiness in my stomach. I literally just got set up on a date. **Me**. On a *date*. Now I wish I had just been honest with the group about my level of experience earlier. Ari is *so* reliable!

It’s not like I was unfamiliar with people having some sort of interest in me. We had been here since I was fifteen, so by now - even though I didn’t live *inside* the city walls - I was pretty well known around town. The adults all referred to me as: ‘The Witch-Girl’, ‘The Little Witch’, ‘The Witch Child’, and - on rare occasions - ‘Nova’. Which is fine, after all, ‘cause that’s *business*.

Things are a bit different with other teenagers though.

I had been interacting with other people my age at random more and more often. The other three always assured me that I was just as pretty as them, and Ari had even taught me how to do makeup. So sometimes I encounter them within the city - young gals and guys and others - and some of them stop and chat with me. Unlike the adults, they seem to want to try and hang out with me and get to know me better. But it was still kinda hard to tell if people wanted to talk to me because *I* was neat and/or pretty, or because they wanted to hear all about ‘the Witch’ for one reason or another.

I absent-mindedly walked up to a shop in the North end of town and opened the door - still very much lost in thought - stepping into the store that I called home.

Huh?

Hushpuppy was standing on the ceiling, fussing with the orientation of some products on a shelf. She looked over at me and gave me an upside down thumbs up.

“Ah. You did it all by yourself. Good job. Close that before space collapses on itself and something explodes.” My first time doing unsupervised Threshold Magic was both accidental *and* anti-climactic.

“Wait. **That’s a thing?!**” I exclaimed, quickly shutting the door behind me.

“Yup. You’re home early. Will we be eating early too?”

“Uh, sure I guess. Hey I want to go to the harvest festival coming up three days from now.”

“Oh shit, is it that time again? You go every year, why ask?”

“Because I want to go and celebrate, instead of work.”

“Oh. Neat. Sounds good.”

“...That’s it?”

“??? Oh. You want me to do that doting thing. Ahem. Why Nova!? Why must you leave on the day of the festival child?!” Pfft!

“You’re ridiculous. I’ll have you know that I’m being taken out by a pretty girl!”

“Taken out?”

“Yeah, Ari and Saya are trying to set me up with Mia!”

“Set you up!?”

“Okay you’re definitely misunderstanding something here. What aren’t you getting about this?”

“Clearly the core concept!”

“Okay. They are arranging a situation wherein I will probably get to kiss a person who’s important to me during the festival. Is that clear?”

“Ooooh gotcha. Nice.”

“So yeah, in three days, it’ll be a date!~” The more I talked about it the more excited I was getting!

“Uh... *yeah*, Nova. That’s how **days** work.”

...

*Sigh.*

\*\*\*

The next three days managed to whip by and drag on at the same time. I wonder if the others were just as excited for today as I was.

My first date!

Wow!

But like... what do I wear? I've legit never done this before! I should have asked Ari, she would have known best! I was standing inside of my closet that used to be a small chest of drawers, but had since expanded as I acquired a more comprehensive wardrobe. I had four different outfits hanging from the ceiling as I paced back and forth; my mind racing a kilometer a second. Which one should I choose?!

There was a light knock at my door and I tried to Will the door open like Hushpuppy does all the time - which didn't quite work - then instead called out, "What's up?"

Hushpuppy traipsed like it was her own room, looked around, and squatted on the wall, "You've been pacing around all morning. What about breakfast?"

"Oh! Uh, sorry. I can't settle on an outfit to go to the festival today!"

"Huh? *That's* your problem? Just wear what I wear. Easy. You're the one who picked this outfit out for me, after all. Plus, the *others* have said it's a good look. So it should be fine, right?"

"*What?!*" I looked her up and down, she was wearing the usual floppy hat, black vest with gold-trim, and her skirt that had the texture of a living, breathing raven, "**Absolutely** not! I picked out your outfit for the Tea Party! Which - if you recall - is a **Witch Party for Witches**. I'm going to a *Human Party for Humans!*"

"Ah. Yeah that makes sense. Can't be wearing the same thing to Witch parties and Human parties. Anyhow pick the third from the left and go make breakfast."

"**No way!** I'm picking the second for sure!"

"Well then there you go."

"I- but- grah *fine*." She got me again. Hushpuppy acts oblivious, but she knows all too well that the best way to get me to act when I'm being indecisive is to try making a decision for me. I looked at the long, loose sleeved red crop-top adorned with little golden flower designs and the high waisted, long dark grey skirt with some comfy red flats.

Perfect.

I took half an hour or so to throw together a nice spread including some rolled omelet filled with minced veggies and ketchup as well as some toasted bread ends with butter, cheese, and cured ham. Once I finished cleaning up, I made sure to take my time - as best I could all things considered - with my makeup and switched eyes with Hushpuppy real quick so I could check myself over from another's perspective. Ever since I started being able to do a little bit of Magic, Hushpuppy's eye-switching trick had gotten a lot easier; we actually only needed to make eye contact and touch above and below our own eyes instead of having one of us touch the other's.

Maybe one day we'll even purchase a damn mirror!

After that, I put on my outfit of choice and Hushpuppy opened a door to the door of the South Gate guard tower. It was pretty startling for the security force there, but they calmed quickly when they saw it was me and *not* 'The Witch'. I had to wonder just what she was doing to spook these people so badly. I made my way back into town from the South gate and made my way to the appointed spot that Mia had chosen. As I rounded the bend onto a side street on my way towards the town square, I saw Mia wearing a long, bright yellow, strapless dress with a single red spider lily laced just over her heart. Her hair was big and poofy atop her head.

Waaaah she's so pretty though!~

"Oh hey! You look great, Nova!" Ah safe! I can definitely trust my instincts fashion-wise!

"You too! I'm super excited! Let's go!"

"Sounds good, here," She grabbed my hand, "Can't have you getting lost or accidentally going to work on me, can I?"

EE!!!!!!

"Uh- ye- of- I- I... suppose not!" I sputtered lamely as she giggled and pulled me along, telling me about the last few days and how much teasing Saya had been doing on the topic of me. I had never really had the opportunity to be *alone* with Mia before, so I didn't realize she was as chatty as she was without Ari constantly interjecting her thoughts into the conversation. As a result, I may as well have been getting carried by *Irrias the Wind Queen* herself for how high up I felt as she confessed all sorts of things to me:

"Oh yeah when you first approached our little group I had been trying to get Ari to come pull you in cause you looked so pretty sipping your drink and reading your book all by yourself. I was like **wow.**"

"Y-yeah? Wow... I guess I saved you some convincing!"

"For sure, but like when you came up to us and were like just... so awkward we were like 'waaaaahhht?!' and that actually made everything easier. Like ob-vee we knew **of** you and stuff, but we finally saw you just hanging out and *not* fleecing adults of their goods! It was like, 'oh shit she's *just like us*... **kinda.**" I felt like she just said something really offensive about my business practices, but I let it slide because I was crushing hard at that point.

"I mean, *yeah*. I live with a Witch and travel all over the place. But other than that I think I'm a pretty normal girl who reads a bunch. I can't imagine being any kind of intimidating!"

"But you **so** were though! Like just a few days ago when the whole k-kissing thing came up. You're so... traveled and learned and you'd already had a PsyEn Ability for **years** when you joined our group. You're so casual about using your Ability too... like Ari is *set*; she's gonna be a Watcher some day with her Ability, but even she doesn't flagrantly info dump into our minds the way you make little sculptures with sand!"

"Oh come now my Ability is nowhere near as useful as Ari's! Or yours for that matter!" Mia's Ability - *Coiffeur* - let her control the hair of herself or anyone she happened to be touching. She could make any hair do *anything* she imagined, which was freakin' awesome. Like... she was going to be the *perfect* stylist some day. Although one day I had told Hushpuppy about Mia's Ability and she went on a jealous tirade about efficiently scalping people, so I guess she had... options?

"Yeah but you're so precise and you can keep it up for a *long* time. Just take the compliment, idiot. I'm saying you are now and have *always* been super cool!" I could *feel* myself blushing when she chided me for my inability to take a proper compliment, "Oh! The music is starting! Let's get super close and dance!" We had been weaving amongst the thickening crowd as we approached the town square, where there were stalls hawking tasty snacks and stores selling wax-paper cups to take their booze on the road. Since it was the harvest festival, even though we weren't 20 - the age of adulthood - we were still able to get some light alcoholic beverages to take into the square with us.

There was a band playing on a fairly well put together stage - one of the mason son's had some adhesive-type Ability that made it easy - and the band was in full swing of their song. It was a super interesting type of music that I hadn't really encountered anywhere in the Central or Eastern Human territories. The guitar and bass were simple, but energetic and the drums **slapped** like *woah*. They were fairly light on the vocals - which was just as well - since it would only distract from the bounce of the drums.

And like the waves in the Boundless Seas, we *bounced* too.

Still holding each other's hand in one hand and a drink in the other, we jumped and we drank. Normally I wouldn't be super thrilled about sweating like this in such nice clothes or in the crisp Autumn air, but the energy was too high not to. Plus, my heart would have been slamming anyhow. After a couple of songs, the music took on a more chill beat for a bit - a needed break for everyone involved - and Mia let go of my hand and instead reached behind my back and pulled me closer by my hip.

"Oh!-"

"Hey," I turned my head shyly to face her and her lips curled into a beautiful smile, "Cheers!" She held up her drink to me and I brought mine up to meet it. We tapped our cups together and drained what was left inside. As soon as I finished swallowing my drink, Mia dropped her cup to the ground, grabbed my shoulder to face me towards her, aaaaaaannnnnnndddddd...

She kissed me.

It was softer than I thought it would be.

...

...

(!^\$\*()@%&(\*\_^(!^@(%\$&(\*)U&!@#)\$)\*(\$!!!

She pulled back slowly and I reluctantly let her, she smiled rather shyly for someone who made the first move and asked me, "Well?" I can't imagine what I must have looked like, but my face definitely felt like it was on fire.

"Well...? Well... I think... I'd like to do that again." She grinned and we did just that. There was a little bit of tittering around us and some comments about 'young love' and 'the little Witch settling down' and other such embarrassing commentary. Mia noticed me glancing around and grabbed my hand.

"Well *magical girl*, I hear you know this city like the back of your hand so... Perhaps you can take the lead and bring us somewhere a bit more... *private*?" My heart was pounding so hard looking at her like this; I felt like I was going crazy.

"I- I'd I- I- *love to!*" I stammered as I dragged her along so that we could further... indulge ourselves.

Year 18

Nova

*Something* was watching me this week.

It always starts when I leave the storefront. I leave out the front door and go directly outside; I like to actually walk into the city legally, not just Threshold Magic my way in. The moment I step outside, I feel a tingling that isn't quite the sensation of Magic on my Coating and not quite the sensation of eyes on the back of my neck. Since we aren't actually set up *that* far from the front gates, I didn't really pay it any mind at first. If a Fae was watching me come and go from the shop... well, they wouldn't take any action anywhere *near* a place they might run into a Witch. So if that feeling went away after I got *inside* the city... nothing really to worry about, right?

Except it didn't go away.

Sometimes, the feeling would follow me from the gate and all the way through the end of the Western market... then sometimes it would disappear. Other times, I'd leave to go meet up with my friends and the newly renovated Cat's Corner Cafe in the town's center... and it would linger with me for a couple hours before disappearing. One day when I was feeling brave, I went all the way to South End - where traffic is pretty sparse early in the day - to buy some new books. I thought maybe I could spot them between my keen eyes and a little bit of help from PsyEn or Magic. But in the end, it was a fruitless endeavour... I never spotted a thing.

I guess my point is... wherever I went... the entity that was watching me was able to follow me. I had been avoiding it because it felt pretty childish, but after a week... I finally broke and told Hushpuppy.

“Some **thing** is watching you? Following you?”

“...Yeah... For like a week now.”

“Hmm, that’s yucky. I’m not sure I like *that* at all.”

“Me too... Could it be a Fae? Could a Fae exist without detection *inside* the city?”

“I suppose it’s possible... but I think more Humans would notice if a Fae were using Magic for so long across so much space...” Hushpuppy at the very least seemed to be taking this seriously, which I was thankful for.

“Well, I need to go to the market to pick up some more fresh ingredients. There are good prices and will be some cool stands set up in the Western market. Do you... think you could... come with me?”

“Casually shopping in the city?” Ah she’s never gonna-

“Sure.”

“Really!?”

“Yah. Why not? If there really is a Fae following you, then that’ll be an easy snack. You get to grab ingredients and I might get surprise sustenance. That’s win-win for sure.” Phew, that’s a relief... thought I might have to throw a little fit there.

We took a little bit of extra time to wash up and get ourselves ready. Hushpuppy let me actually wash and brush out her hair and even pick out a nicer outfit for her. Ever since that one time years ago when I picked out a sleeveless shirt and pleated skirt for her to wear to the Witch’s Tea Party, she had decided that *that* was her style. Personally I think she’s just too lazy to think up an outfit for herself. But it lets me both dress her however I want like a doll **and** let’s me go through her - surprisingly extensive - wardrobe for my own future reference. I picked out a bright yellow vest with black trim - allowing the small, couple centimeter long spikes from the top of her shoulders to be on full display - and a long skirt crimson skirt with a short slit.

We were nicely dolled up for a practical run into the city to grab some food. Maybe I could get her to actually say a word or two to my friends or girlfriend. I had to say: I was actually a little bit nervous. Normally when I went out with Hushpuppy, we just walked out of the front door, directly into a tavern or some favoured restaurant and didn’t spend too much time talking to people. I can’t actually recall a time where she **willingly** went out shopping with me when I wasn’t dragging her out to buy new clothes. I actually almost forgot that she was coming with me due to very specific circumstances.

Almost.

Hushpuppy secured her big floppy hat on her head and opened the door, allowing me to exit first. I walked out and-

???

There was that feeling again... but it was only for a few seconds, then it suddenly ceased. Perhaps because they saw me first, then Hushpuppy, then ran as the Wind blows?

“Hushpuppy... did you feel that? It was only for a-”

“As a matter of fact... I did, child. Very good instincts. Doubtless they have switched from Magical to Manual methods of observation. Keep an eye out for any new faces.” It was wild to me how she could only manage to sound bored when she was actually talking sense.

We made it to the gate without incident; the gate guards hadn't seen Hushpuppy in *years* at this point - since she always just walked directly into whatever building she wanted to from the storefront - and were unstandably surprised to see her. We walked down the central road from the North gate to the town square, not playing around with any side streets. We received many glances and numbers of hushed comments as we passed... I guess Hushpuppy really *did* stand out. Even if she didn't have her giant, pointed, floppy hat that she insisted on wearing... I guess I was just so used to her Witchiness at this point that none of her features really registered as abnormal to me.

We spent several minutes stopped in the town square, greeting various familiar faces and exchanging pleasantries with Saeya - the proprietress of the Cat's Corner Cafe - whom I had promised to introduce to Hushpuppy if I ever managed to get her to come out with me. Hushpuppy was reasonably pleasant, but clearly distracted. Even as she responded to Saeya's pleasantries, she was very visibly and embarrassingly sniffing at the air and scrunching her face, as if not quite recalling the source of an unpleasant, but familiar scent. Saeya thanked us for stopping by and sent us off with some nice, cold sweet tea, which did add a bit of a spring to Hushpuppy's step.

“Not bad, that one.”

“I kinda get the feeling you'd say that about anyone who gave you something edible for free.” I teased.

“Mmm, I'd like to argue with you... but you're right!” She conceded with a sharp toothed grin, which drew an audible gasp from someone who was watching us walk by. Entering the Western market, I was greeted by the familiar folk that I dealt with on an almost daily basis. As ever everyone was pleased to see me and more than a little shocked to see Hushpuppy with me. It really was interesting watching Hushpuppy actually behave like a proper merchant networking outside of her own shop. Asking about the surrounding region and news from that the farmers in the market had heard from other passing merchants.

It was when we were on our way back towards the townsquare that we *both* felt it. A sensation that was completely and utterly foreign to me. Not quite the Magic or Magirradiation I was familiar with... but it definitely wasn't PsyEn...

"Is that... what *is* that? *That* can't be a normal Fae, right?"

Hushpuppy shook her head negatively, "No... that's definitely Magic, but... the Magic is... wrong?" She ended with some uncertainty. Wrong? Can *Magic* be *Wrong*? Isn't it kinda separate from everything else anyhow? As we entered the townsquare, I felt that bizarre sensation again, but this time it was accompanied by a chill that ran down my spine. I stopped and started to look around back and forth with my Third Eye opened as Hushpuppy looked at me curiously. There were people milling all about the town square, friends chatting away on a bench here, a couple sitting beside the fountain there, people eating food outdoors and enjoying the fine Spring weather, lots of people I knew and a few I didn't and-

"Hey Hushpuppy... do we know that person?"

"Which person?"

There was a very, very pale woman with super red, messy, curly hair standing so still that my eyes almost glazed right over her, despite her only being 10 meters away. The only reason she caught my eye was that her Coating looked *very* similar to mine: as if she too was constantly exposed to Magic. She was staring *right* at Hushpuppy and seemed to be muttering under her breath. She had one blue eye and one hazel and as my finger came up to point at her... her mouth curled into a cold smile, "The red-head over there across the mark-"

"**Nova. Run.**" Hushpuppy's voice completely dropped its typical playful facade, she was looking straight at the person I had pointed out.

"Wha-"

"**RUN!**" She bellowed as she grabbed my shirt and whipped me violently several meters off to the side towards a nearby storefront. As Hushpuppy threw me, the Pale Woman spoke in an echoing voice cut that through the din of the town square.

"*Junius Hushani.*"

The name - upon being uttered - created a massive, heavy vortex of magic that instantly slammed down over the entire town square of Solona. The sheer force of it brought me and every other person in the immediate vicinity to our knees. I raised my head up - with great effort - to get my bearings and my jaw dropped at what I saw: a gargantuan, Magically constructed, sphere encompassing the entire town square, speckled with metaphysical chains all over its surface that all ran across open space and along and up through the earth all towards a single point.

All towards Junius Hushani.

Better known to me as A Witch Called Hushpuppy.

## A Witch Formerly Known as Junius Hushani

*Fucking.*

**Ow.**

“Well then! I had just been *wracking* my brain for how I was going to get you to leave that little house of yours!”

It *would* be **Her**, wouldn't it?

It had to be, right?

“After all... I'm not fool enough to try and engage a Witch in its own Domain! No matter how *young* they might be!

I'm not great with names, but even I remember **Her**.

“But - wonderfully - you simply *walked* right out of your house. After all this time, I never would have guessed you'd be **this** easy to pin down!”

*This damn 'Human'.*

“...Evelynn Vandree, was it?”

“Oh how delightful, you remember me! Honestly I wasn't sure you would. I know how *flighty* you Witches tend to be.” I glanced around at the Name-Binding Magic she had enacted on me; such precision and such... *power*, it even made me take a knee! The moment she finished uttering my name, she had gathered *this* much Magic into one spot. All of the water in the fountain at the center of the town square evaporated in an instant... the ground shuddered and the surrounding storefronts shattered. Through my bare feet on the cobblestone, I could feel the tremors continuing through the earth.

This city was done for... which was whatever. But Nova was still off to the side on her hands and knees, not quite recovered from Evelynn's Magic.

“...Speaking of Witches... you've been busy, huh?”

“Hmm? Oh yes! Well, it's only practical, right? After all, if I'm trying to follow up on a lead to find you, sometimes the only clue I have is 'I heard a Witch settled down over *here*'. Truly it's quite frustrating to have to waste my time to follow up on all of these false positives! Best to cull them as I stumble upon them... that way it increases the odds in my favour that the next Witch I hear about is **you**.” Monster.

“...Just how many brought you to this point?”

The empty smile she'd been wearing widened into a terrible grin, “Enough.” I felt sweat drip down my face... Fear... it's been a long time. I glanced to the side once more: good, Nova was gone.

Enough stalling, then.

I grabbed the brim of my hat and flicked it off my head - pulling out my staff out of it as it left my reach - and slammed my kama onto it, securing the sickle to the rod with a twist. I glanced around and sniffed the air.

“Tell me: Where *is* that golem of yours, anyhow? I assume you must have made another one! Did you leave it at home? What? *Afraid I'll tear it apart again?*” Evelynn's face dropped its playful facade at that comment and I giggled at her.

“*Of course*. I lost a year worth of research having to put Takos back together. Not that *you* would understand the value of a year, what with your fake immortality, *Witch*.” Excellent. No golem. That will simplify dealing with her I think.

“I assure you, Evelynn, my immortality is quite real.”

“Now I do believe *that*... is worth testing, *Junius*.”

Evelynn reached her left hand at me, which began to glow with Magical energy and discharge a constant ooze of her trademark unsettling, geometric fractal patterns. She began to squeeze her hand into a fist, so I spread open the fingers on my left hand, since paper beats rock. I could see space bending in a sphere around me, but it could not overcome my defenses. She clicked her tongue and I responded with an attack of my own by making a rectangle with my index fingers and thumbs then moving my hands diagonally apart, tracing an invisible door in the air. Such doors with no Substantially defined threshold were too unstable to safely pass a living thing through, but were more than passable for bringing dangerous objects through.

Like lava, for example.

A deluge of glowing red, brown speckled hot liquid came spewing out towards the Pale One standing just across from me. She rolled her eyes and both her hands glowed with intense, visible Magirradiation. She must have done something to drastically lower the temperature of the air between us, since the lava immediately turned to tumbling rocks that hit some invisible shield just in front of her.

Good.

She was the only Human Magician I've ever met who was precise - or perhaps insane - enough to use her eye as a focal point for a spell. Her right eye was busy maintaining the Name-Binding Magic on me and her hands were defending herself from the lava and resulting debris. Last time I had encountered her I had had enough of an advantage in close quarters that she had to call in her golem. Even as the rocks began to fall from the air and stop near her feet, I let the door collapse and quickly advanced on her, leaping with my three free limbs as I held my kama-staff out to the side. I reached her almost instantaneously, but she had that same sort of smug smile that Nova wears when she knows she's right. I started to swing at her but-

***Danger.***

I solidified the air just beneath my feet and tried to jump backwards to avoid *whatever* it was I thought I felt. I got most of my body out of the way of whatever attacked me, but left my left leg from the middle of the shin down in front of Evelyn.

*What just hit me?!*

I landed on my remaining foot several meters away from her, black blood oozing from the clean slice at the new bottom of my shin. It was PsyEn, that much was certain... and her Ability... it... shit what did it do again? Cut things? It cut things. Didn't she need to use her hands for that? No way she could be commanding that much Magic *and* channel a PsyEn Ability from the same focal point. Which once again begged the question:

**What just hit me?**

"Oh? Colour me impressed, *Junius*. I didn't think you were still Human enough to react to *that*." She cooed at me as the lower third of my left leg began to float seemingly of its own accord in front of her. She put a hand on her chin, making a show of 'studying' my leg when the outlines of little black squares appeared all over it. She looked back at me and smiled as my leg fell to the ground in a rain of tiny cubes into a pile that resembled mushy brown and black and white tofu.

"Now I'm sure it won't take you long to regenerate that... but by Nashtav did *that* feel good to do. Maybe I **should** deal with you piece by piece..." She took her first step towards me since she enacted her Name-Binding Magic, both hands out to the side, her Magic-oozing palms facing me.

"After all... ***you can't run from me anymore.***"

Nova

I'm scared.

I stumbled down the main road connecting the Eastern residential area to the town square. Gasping for breath, I was hunched over with a hand on a yellow brick building.

I'm scared... But I need to think...

What **was** that thing?!

That pale, woman-shaped *thing*... it... that was **so** much Magic, on such a huge scale... I can't even... It wasn't even *aimed* at me and I felt like I was going to die: it was *that* dense. But there was no way a *Human* could do that! So it had to be a Witch, right? No, I saw the eyes... So it must be a Fae, then. But even the eyes aside... it had a very Human Coating.

A Slaugh, then. It **must** be: a Fae who has eaten many, many Humans. The Fae-equivalent of a Witch. Only a Slaugh could just walk into Solona without being noticed or sensed by anyone!

Right?

**“NOVA!”** I stood up - having finally caught my breath - and saw a panicked Ari running towards me, “Oh shit your Coating is *fucked* - more than usual - are you okay!?! The ground keeps shaking! **What’s happening?!**” She had her hands on my shoulders, desperate for answers.

“It’s... it’s a **Slaugh!**” Ari blanched, eyes even wider. Saya and Mia had come running up behind her and came to stand in front of me with her, Mia snatching up my hand in both of her own.

“Are you hurt?!” God she looked terrified... I wished I had anything comforting to tell any of them.

“W-w-we should tell the guards, right?!” Saya asked, uncertain as to whether or not an average Solonian guard could fight such a creature.

“No I’m okay-ish... And no. The Slaugh, i-it trap- It- Hushpuppy is fighting it! They are throwing around Magic on a **massive** scale like it’s nothing! Everyone needs to leave the city, *right now.*” Their jaws dropped as they began to understand the enormity of what was at stake. That thing... Hushpuppy *knew* it and it... knew Hushpuppy’s **name**. I had honestly forgotten that Hushpuppy wasn’t her true name. But... she was talking to it and she was looking at me... because she needed me out of the way. She was worried about me getting in the crossfire... but I knew she didn’t care about any of the other people in this city.

“Tell as **many** people as you all can. Spread the word exponentially: The Witch and a Slaugh are fighting in the town square and **no one is safe in the city.**” Saya and Ari were nodding fearfully, but Mia gripped my hand tighter.

“What are **you** going to do?” She asked carefully, her eyes narrowing.

“I... I have to go back to the shop. I need to find *something* that can *help Hushpuppy.*” Hushpuppy is trapped by that spell... I don’t know if Magic of that level can be dismantled, or if Hushpuppy can even win against that thing.

“No. Come with us. **Please.**” The desperation on Mia’s face broke my heart in two. I *could* just leave. I *could* just run away and stay safe. Stay with Mia and Saya and Ari and protect them... and just leave my- leave Hushpuppy behind. I’m sure that’s what Hushpuppy wants right now... but...

“I can’t, I **have** to go.”

“**No you don’t.** What can *you* even do!? You said yourself, no one is safe! That includes you!” Mia was already starting to cry and I wanted to hug her... but there wasn’t any time!

“Mia, Saya, Ari... Please be safe.”

Mia pulled me in and embraced me, “I’m not letting you go until you agree to run away with us.”

“Then you’ll stay at arms length.” A Magical force pushed the three of them away from me a full arms length. With no time to celebrate or even acknowledge my successful use of

non-Threshold Magic, I turned my back on my first real group of friends and first girlfriend and opened a nearby door to Hushpuppy and I's home.

**"Nova wai-!"** I stepped through and slammed the door behind me. Wiping the tears from my own eyes, I ran to the hallway beyond the front desk and sprinted to the door at the end of the hall. I took a steadying breath in front of the door before opening it into the Armory that I learned existed a couple years back.

"Come on... what do I need here..." I was wracking my brain for *some* kind of clue. But Hushpuppy never really told me anything about different types of Fae other than how they tasted. And she certainly never mentioned anything about meeting a Slauch in the past... No. I was overthinking this; I just needed to bring whatever anti-Magic I could get my hands on. I Reinforced myself and grabbed the crossbow and Meteoric Iron bolts that once belonged to The Man Who Called Himself My Father. Next, I activated *Dust Bunny* to search the room for more Meteoric Iron dust and found... quite frankly an unconscionable amount!

What was Hushpuppy going to *do* with all of this?! Was she arming herself against other Witches...?

I Cladded my PsyEn around the bolts and a ball of Meteoric Iron dust floating above my left hand. I looked at the door and swallowed past the lump in my throat. I'm *scared*. I'm scared to attempt this without supervision. I'm scared to walk out there. I'm scared that when I do I'll get hurt. I'm scared that when I do, it won't matter because Hushpuppy will already be dead. I-

***Don't have time for this.***

Since I was alone, I let myself scream into the empty room for a bit, then kicked open the Armory door and jumped through with my eyes squeezed firmly shut. I could feel the sun moving all around me and I opened my eyes to find myself on the North side of the town square, smack in the middle of the Cat Corner Cafe. I must have opened a doorway to the back room of my favourite restaurant - a very Hushpuppy-esque maneuver I guess - and was struck by the sheer destruction that awaited me.

I had spent so much time in this beautiful town square over the last few years. Shopping and chatting and laughing and loving and feeling like a real, *normal* Human for the first time ever. Saeya, the owner of the Cat's Corner, Auron the Blacksmith, Claudia the tailor, Anna the baker... all these beautiful people I knew and befriended, and all of their friends and acquaintances and enemies and...

There was just... so much ***death***. Many people who had been relaxing or shopping on the outskirts of the town square seemed to have barely made it out of the area. But... the group of friends that had been chatting in the middle walking path, the couple flirting and sitting on the fountain, several people I knew from my own errands who *just* happened to be walking by at the time.

All face down in the cracked, powdered cobblestone... with no PsyEn left to indicate even the most minute of brain activity.

What if Mia had been at the Cat Corner Cafe today? What if Ari and Saya had been?

I unholstered the crossbow that I had strapped to my back, loaded a Meteoric Iron bolt, picked my way over to the wall next to the glassless window as quietly as possible and peeked into the devastated plaza. The Slaugh's back was turned towards me and it was sauntering menacingly towards Hushpuppy who - oh god she's missing part of her leg - was standing on one foot and covered in small wounds, glowering at her opponent.

But coming from the Slaugh's back were... tentacles? No like really, *really* long arms that ended in perfectly normal looking hands. Only they were **completely** made of **PsyEn**.

...Which meant Hushpuppy couldn't see them!

Hushpuppy

*Dammit.*

I'm not used to seeing this much of my own blood anymore.

*How* did she get **this** powerful?!

"Perhaps I built up this encounter in my head somewhat. I thought that you'd put up far more of a fight than this." I was down on one knee as she approached me, gloating, "To think that this is all that *misbegotten* immortality of yours actually amounts to. I'm *disappointed*."

"Tch... and to think... That a *Human* so... **childish** could be so Powerful... Makes me sick. All of you are so damn caught up in the *idea* of the four sapient species that you miss the obvious cruelty of your contempt."

"Obvious cruelty?" This one is too curious for her own good... I just need a bit longer to finish what I'd started.

"Did you *really* never think about it, Evelynn? With **all** of that intellect of yours that you're *sooo* proud of... did you never stop to consider how weird the fact that a Witch can even exist at all is?"

"...**Explain.**" *Perfect.*

"Tell me Evelynn: of the two things that can properly *destroy* a Fae, why is the only one that is native to this planet *teeth*? Any normal Human can *completely* kill a Fae if they are willing to eat them, Fek'thal can do the same thing. A Fae, lacking strong Substance of its own, can still consume Humans and Fek'thal and devour their Mind and Substance..."

"...And your point, *Junius*?"

"My **point**, *Evelynn*, is that it is far, *far* too cruel to hold the consumption of others against us hybrid existences... when we were clearly **designed** to devour each other whole. *Something* always intended for us to consume one another... don't you think?"

“Interesting theory, Junius. Perhaps the most logical things that ever come out of your-”

“**Burn.**” I said just as she came within 5ish meters of me. When I see or think about Evelynn, the first image that pops into my head is that of a Human child armed with a magnifying glass coming upon an anthill. There is a purity *and* a creativity to that kind of cruelty that will never cease to amaze me. So if I was going to kill Evelynn, it only seemed practical that I should do likewise.

Since I had taken a knee, I had been working on solidifying and warping various circles of air high up in the sky, constructing lenses lower and lower. It was taking me quite a long time to execute on this, since it's even more *specific* an application than turning the clouds into playful kittens. As the final lens of solidified air began to form just above the Name-Binding area that Evelynn had conjured into existence, she looked up and finally seemed to take notice.

“Impressive. And here I thought you didn't comprehend physics *at all.*” She stomped one of her feet and a tremor ran through the ground. A whole bunch of sand came up and formed a crude semi-spherical shield between her and the lens, which finished its formation directly afterwards. The highly refracted and refocused sunlight that I had begun manipulating from far, far above us using the solidified air lenses settled directly on Evelynn. The entire immediate area began to heat up and I smirked at her; her sandy shield wouldn't hold for long against temperatures like this. As if in response to my triumphant thought, the sand began to glow red like lava and bubble - following the curvature of her impromptu shield - drip on the ground around her.

“But I've always been surprised at just how bad at *chemistry* most of you Witches are.” Suddenly one, then three, then five Magic glows appeared in the air around Evelynn.

Where did all of these focal points come from!?

Space began warping nearby and I felt my ears pop from the change in air pressure. The immediate area rapidly cooled and along with the sand, which now shimmered and had a solid shape, which Evelynn was actively manipulating. She warped the cooling glass into an irregularly shaped mass that took in the light and scattered it.

“You see, *Junius*, manipulating sunlight for an attack is fancy, but light-based offenses are easily dealt with by divergent lenses. And if I have all the raw materials I need around me - sand and heat - then I can do it instantly.” There was a massive halo of light on the ground around Evelynn from my atmospheric attack refracting uselessly around her. She was using just... so much Magic at once...

“...You monster.”

“**Glass** houses, Junius,” She giggled to herself, “I had been *wondering* what you were up to so far above us, so I wanted to see what you were going to do. It's not a terrible ambushing technique and it is certainly a trick I will remember and execute on much more efficiently at a later time, I think.”

What do I do here? What *can* I do here? She can simultaneously generate an unknown number of different Magical effects by unknown means. And on top of that, they are all **so** targeted and specific. To be honest, that's more than a tad unfair. Just then, I spotted movement beyond Evelynn...

Nova!?

*Why?!*

She made eye contact with me, closed her right eye and put her index finger and thumb above and below it. My eyes widened in understanding: Ability aside, the problem I was having was a PsyEn problem. I mimicked what she was doing and we both tapped our noses at the same time.

"Boop."

And not a moment too soon. With Nova remotely generating a Third Eye effect, I was able to see what appeared to be eight... no, ten elongated limbs made of PsyEn that each ended in hands. I leapt to the side as eight of the limbs converged on where I had just been standing, reducing the ground to so much powder. So she was using... pure PsyEn as a focus for Magic... Isn't that impossible?

I guess not.

"Hmm? What do we have here? If I recall correctly, last time we met, you had to engage in some impressively nonsensical self-mutilation to see PsyEn. What changed, I wonder? Hmph, no matter! How do you like my *Phantom Limbs*? It is so very, very useful to have a few extra sets of hands when you're doing research!"

"*Phantom Limb*, huh? I've heard of those... It's when you lose a limb but feel like a limb is still there."

"Well look at you, *Junius*! Sounds like you might have studied a single thing in your wastefully long life!"

"...I wonder..." Was all I offered her, since she gave me a great idea. I brought my sickle across my body, hooked it under my left armpit, grinned at Evelynn, and sliced off my own arm. As black blood glooped from I slammed the sickle into the powdered ground in front of me and snatched my falling arm out of the air, sticking it hand first into my mouth before starting to chew.

Evelynn and her multitude of arms took a wary stance for the first time since this battle started.

"...What are you-"

"If one eats others, they should both prepare to be eaten *and* eat themselves, obviously. Plus... I won't be able to deal with *Phantom Limbs* without some of my own."

“Nonsense, as ever.” She growled, committing to a multi-pronged attack from her various *Phantom Limbs*. But since I was now missing both an arm and most of my leg, I was able to generate some phantom limbs of my own... and since I am not wracked with a perverse sentimentality for the Human form, I obviously did not limit myself to a single appendage per joint. As Evelynn’s PsyEn *Phantom Limbs* snaked through the space between us towards me, just as many ethereal tentacles sprouted from my bloody left shoulder stump to intercept them. Her dangerous limbs were entangled in my impromptu limbs.

“That’s. Not. How. Things. Work.” Evelynn finally showed some of the same fluster that I recalled from our previous encounter, “Just because they have the same name does **not** mean they work the same way!”

“I wonder...” I mused, planting my corporeal and phantom feet on the ground before leaping at her to try to decapitate her now that I had her *Phantom Limbs* tangled up. She grimaced slightly as approached her and an additional two *Phantom Limbs* extended out of her back, which caught my swinging kama. We stood just a meter apart, locked in an entangled stalemate.

“*What’s wrong,*” I growled as I push both the weight of my Substance *and* Soul behind my weapon, “Just grow another arm and divide me!” Evelynn glared at me as we both knew why she wasn’t; even *she* couldn’t keep subdividing her Coating without risking Magirradiation or taking the backlash of her own weirdly specific spell casting.

Just then, I saw Nova take aim with a big crossbow.

*I told her to run!!! Why choose disobedience **now** of all times!?*

She squeezed the trigger and the Meteoric Iron quarrel shot out quickly and accurately. Evelynn clearly noticed both the click of the ranged weapon and the change in my focus and had flicked a hand out towards Nova and her oncoming projectile. The bolt stalled in the air for a brief moment with a spark of lightning as it impacted whatever defensive Magical barrier Evelynn had surrounding her, then continued its unerring flight towards its target’s head.

Where it was promptly snatched out of the air by Evelynn’s Reinforced, Human hand.

“**NOVA SHE’S NOT A-**” My words caught in my throat- no, I suppose they did just the opposite: my words burbled uselessly out of my now open chest cavity.

“That’s enough, Junius.” The moment I had lost my focus, Evelynn was able to get the two *Phantom Limbs* that were blocking my kama-staff close enough to me to activate her Ability through all ten of the PsyEn fingers. I stumbled backwards as my own improvised phantom limbs failed me. I glanced to my right and saw my right arm fall away from my shoulder. Even as I heard Evelynn cackling to herself, the biggest insult that was on my mind as I fell forward onto the ground was that I was definitely going to get *dust inside* my body.

Nova

What!?

No.

Nononononononono.

“Ah...” The Creature Calling Itself Evelynn wiped a tear from her eye once her laughter subsided. She was still holding the Meteoric Iron crossbow bolt I had fired at her with her bare hands like it was normal steel. Hushpuppy was lying facedown after her chest suddenly burst outward; black droplets of blood stained the clothes of the monster who did this to her.

I was so scared I couldn't even see straight.

“For the Witch-Slave to show up and end up running distraction for *me*... you must *really* want out, don't you?” Her full attention was on me, but her PsyEn limbs had picked up Hushpuppy off the ground by her remaining arm and throat, suspending her in the air as if proudly displaying a trophy.

“B-b-b-ut h-how?! Y-you're a S-S-*Slaugh*.” I was shaking so much; the murderous pressure exuded by this thing was far greater than any massive beast or ancient Witch I had ever encountered. But she simply tilted her head and scrunched her face up in confusion.

“A Slaugh? Why do yo- Oh. *Oh* honey, *no!* I'm *Human!* Just like you! Don't you see all of this PsyEn? Oh, perhaps you're curious about my Magic! This is just what it looks like when you *study* and *work reeeaaalilly* hard!” A Human!? But... that's *impossible*, right? She was walking towards me with an uncomfortably sincere smile on her face as she spoke. I wanted to back away from her, but my legs wouldn't move.

“Now then, you'll never be free of this Witch unless someone does something about the Charming Magic she put over you!” Charming Magic? What is she talking about? She raised a hand towards me, inverted it, and then flicked her fingers back into her palm as if beckoning me towards her. Suddenly there was a flash of golden light from the necklace that Hushpuppy had given me for my 16th birthday and the sound of a beating heart underneath the gong of a large bell. I briefly saw myself surrounded by a sphere made of interlocked heptagons.

Evelynn let out a whistle, “*An Anti-Magic Barrier*... made using *Magic*,” She looked over her shoulder at Hushpuppy, who was still hanging in the air from Evelynn's elongated PsyEn limbs, “How did you even *manage* that? That's against *all* of the rules of Magic.” She shook her head and turned back towards me, “All of you Witches... every single one of them... they do Magic *wrong!* Ugh. Anyhow... *You* must be quite valuable to Junius - quite a few secrets stuck in that pretty little head of yours - for her to go this far to keep Magic away from you. Perhaps I should borrow you for a bit...” She brought all but the two PsyEn Limbs holding Hushpuppy over to me and used some more Magic to activate the barrier... then the ethereal limbs touched the barrier all over and the whole thing fell apart in glowing golden shards.

She repeated the same motion that she had performed earlier, “Alright then, your head may feel cloudy for a couple of minutes. So why don't you sit down while I finish Junius off. This part tends to take a while with Witches...” Her previously jovial smile twisted into a sadistic grin and she turned her back on me.

“But I’ve had a **lot** of practice.”

“**NO!**” I could hardly believe such a screech came from my own mouth, but there I was. I activated *Dust Bunny* and pulled both my fallen Meteoric Iron dust and a huge amount of sand from the surrounding area. They swirled in what I hoped was a menacing fashion around my hands, “S-stop hurting Hushpuppy! I w-won’t l-l-let you t-t-take her from me!”

Her head craned back over her shoulder and she looked at me with an unsettlingly blank expression.

“...I swear I removed whatever sway she had over your mind...” She cocked her head at me as she regarded me for several moments before twisting her face into a look resembling pity, “Ah. Wretched thing. The shackles that bind you are unfortunately not magical in nature,” She raised a single hand towards me and I saw Hushpuppy drop to the ground as she brought all 12 of her PsyEn Limbs to bear on me, “How disappointing. Only an honest death will cure you now. Will free you from your immurating loyalty.”

I yelped as all of her disembodied limbs dove in at me from various angles. I used my Ability to throw up a semi-sphere of sand like I saw her do earlier and Cladded the sand in as much PsyEn as I could spare. I could hear the clash of her PsyEn against mine and my vision darkened slightly. Holy shit, I’d *never* experienced the feedback against my own mind like this before.

*I’m so scared.*

*Doesn’t matter, attack now!*

“An entertaining choice. But you’re a few decades too young to try to match your Mind against mine. And...” She was suddenly behind me, “Don’t block your line of sight against an opponent you know **nothing** about.”

*I’m dead.*

*Die.*

I Cladded as much PsyEn as I could into a dense spike of sand *around* a dense spike of Meteoric Iron dust and I whipped around and SHOOMP’d the improvised weapon right at her chest. She did not seem ready for me to be able to fire off something that quickly and she collapsed all of her hands inward to grab the projectile. I released my Ability on the sand and SHOOMP’d the Meteoric Iron spike once more through the crumbling dust.

Which she blocked with the crossbow bolt I had fired at her earlier.

*Fuck.*

“An entertaining Ability. Now then-”

“Hey... *Evelynn*...”

We both froze and turned towards a bloody, disfigured, broken, and very, **very** angry Hushpuppy.

### Hushpuppy

Face down in powdered stone.

Arms and a leg severed.

And bleeding out because some overpowered *Human* decided that their fleeting time was worth more than all of mine combined.

Yes. *A Witch's Death*.

...

If only.

But the fucking *child* just **had** to put herself in danger.

Nova is just... so young and *rude*. Can't even let me die properly.

Kids, am I right?

With too much effort, I tilted my eyes out of the Earth. There was Nova trying her best - just like she always does - manipulating Meteoric Iron dust and PsyEn Cladded sand in a desperate attempt to prolong her short life.

*Unacceptable.*

That-

No.

*She is mine.*

My only employee.

The only *child* that matters.

With too much effort once more, I look to my right and I find that my right arm is too far away.

But if it's **my** arm, what is it doing detached from **my** body?

Right arm reattached, it was very easy to return the second most important thing I have to my hand. With the rest of my effort, I brought myself to my foot, lacking the faculties to even conjure a phantom limb to finish standing on. Nova desperately blocked the *Phantom Limbs* with a sandy shield and Evelynn simply connected the space immediately in front of her and the space immediately behind Nova and stepped through. Evelynn was too close to *my child* and I didn't have the range to separate them. I don't know the length of my kama-staff do I?

It's one and a half meters.

Dammit. I know this weapon too well.

But if I don't reach them, then it's over-

"...Hey... Evelynn." Both Nova and Evelynn turned their attention towards me, "Do you know how long this kama is?" With my one remaining hand, I brought the staff up to my face and placed it between my teeth. I chomped down and the staff splintered somewhere along its length. Evelynn's gaze hardened at my question.

"Cause I sure don't." I assured her, as I raised what was left of my weapon above my head, closed my eyes, and swung my kama.

### Nova

Hushpuppy! She's alive and-

"...Hey... Evelynn." I swear every hair on my body stood up when she said just those two words. Hushpuppy's moods had ceased to frighten me years and years ago. But something about the clear determination behind those words terrified me and even caught this 'Evelynn's' attention. She brought the only physical weapon I'd ever seen her wield up to her mouth and chomped through it somewhere between halfway and a third from the base. It splintered and the lower portion fell to the ground, throwing a small puff of stone dust into the air.

"Do you know how long this kama is?" She brought her modified kama-staff above her head as splinters fell from her bloody mouth.

"Cause I sure don't" She smiled at me just before she-

*Closed her eyes.*

And swung.

Crap.

Time is a funny thing - not just for immortals - but for everyone and everything. In reality, the swing only took a fraction of a second. Maybe it was the adrenaline, or maybe it was the burden of knowledge that came with understanding how Magic really works in Hushpuppy's hands, but it felt like it took forever to finish her attack. I saw **the sky** part along the trajectory of her swing, rolling back on itself infinitely as it tried to reclaim the parted space that Hushpuppy was not yet ready to bring back together. I chose not to move at all and braced myself for what was coming as I saw Evelynn's PsyEn limbs shoot forward to try to stop Hushpuppy. But just before the attack could reach her, Hushpuppy's finished her own 'attack' with the kama's tip pointed well behind her.

The chaos was immediate and horrifying.

Hushpuppy had aimed her swing between Evelynn and I; her intentions obviously being to 'separate Nova and Evelynn'. There was a cacophonous torrent of Magically driven wind from every direction at once as the short meter of distance between myself and our enemy became ten, then a hundred, then a thousand, then several thousand meters. I could actually *feel* reality straining with the effort of maintaining this unnatural division. This was an unsustainable warping of space and any second now, it was going to *snap back*.

And then it did.

It felt as though the entirety of the planet Solbalim was trembling. Rocks were falling, but rocks were also flying, and so were buildings... buildings I recognized, market stalls and shops and farms and corpses and stragglers beyond saving and the life work of thousands of folk whose faces I could clearly apply to a name. I wanted to dive to the ground, but I wasn't even sure which way was down in those short, impossibly long seconds. As the ground shook violently and the clouds screamed, I could also see the stretching and fraying of the gargantuan sphere that represented Evelynn's Name-Binding Magic over one Junius Hushani.

And of course it was.

To keep Hushpuppy from escaping, the Name-Binding Magic needed to attach her to an area of space... But that particular 'space' was... well... all over the place at that point. This *must* have been Hushpuppy's main objective; you can't keep someone bound to a space that *doesn't exist*. The bubble stretched and stretched and stretched, its different anchoring points moving in what appear to be multiple directions at once before Evelynn - who was no longer visible to me - must have been forced to cancel it. With another torrent of Magirradiated wind, the bubble collapsed.

I looked down over the edge and gasped. Where there once was central Solona, there was just a massive, ash-filled **canyon** that had to be at *least* a kilometer deep. Looking North and South along the length of this deep scar in the land, it stretched to the horizon in both directions. This was... *too much*... Did everyone make it out alright? Were they able to get out of range of this attack?! As I peered out over the chasm, I sighed with relief and my eyes started tearing up, for amongst the floating rubble and buildings and cobblestone streets that were snaking through the sky - broken, battered, bruised, but *alive* - was Hushpuppy, just standing in midair.

**"-JUNIUS!!!!!!!!!!"** Evelynn was closing the distance rapidly, leaping between the lazily floating buildings above the nascent canyon. Hushpuppy had been much closer to my side of the canyon than Evelynn's and I could see her heave a great sigh. She hopped forward in the air on her remaining leg and suddenly was right next to me with a pop as the Air Door she made collapsed.

"Hushp-"

"This might hurt," She said as a door suddenly opened right next to us and she hopped through it. She hooked her kama on the top of the air door from the other side to keep it from collapsing on me.

**"DON'T YOU RUN FROM ME JUNIUS! THIS ISN'T-"** I quickly dove through and the door collapsed behind me as Hushpuppy removed her kama. I immediately doubled over, my entire body throbbing with a dull pain. Air Doors were very fast in a pinch, but they weren't true Thresholds and were extremely unstable. If you aren't a Witch or a Fae then Magirradiation sickness is almost inevitable.

"...Nova... grab... your necklace..." Curled in a ball on the ground, I grabbed the necklace and... felt instantly better? At the same time, Hushpuppy fell over herself. Wait... is *that* what this thing is for?! Making Hushpuppy eat my share of Magical backlash!?

**"Hushpuppy!?!"** Wait, wait no-no-no give it back! Let me take it back! You can't be doing this right now!" Hushpuppy was on her remaining hand and knee, staring at the dark floorboards of our shop. She ignored me and continued to take heavy, ragged breaths. I was kneeling next to her, stroking her back like what was once done for me when I was sick as a child. After a minute or two, she finally spoke to me.

"Why... Did you... come back? I told you... To run." She was practically growling with the effort of speaking to me. I backed away from her slightly, stunned and I started tearing up again.

But 'Why'? *Really?!?* By the Four she pisses me off *so much!*

"Because - **you moron** - if you managed to get yourself killed, then you **actually** would have killed all of my parents!" Her head snapped towards me and her black and blue eyes were wide, she opened her mouth to say something but I wasn't finished yet. I took a stomping step forward, "Your **most** redeeming quality is your immortality because it's *supposed* to mean you won't die before me! 'Oh Nova you should've gone ahead and lived without me...' FUCK. THAT. You're *immortal!* You of **all people** should know how cruel that is!" I took another step forward so I was standing right above her, she had flopped herself onto her bum to look straight up at me, "You murdered Jasmin! You murdered The Man That Called Himself Father! But you gave me **everything** in return! And don't you even **dare** try rationalizing this with your 'employee' bullshit! You've taken **care** of me! You've **protected** me! And I'm still alive *because of you!* So **THIS-**" I gestured up and down at myself several times rapidly, "- Is **your responsibility!** So don't you **ever** tell me to go and survive without you, because there is **no** version of this world where I'm better off without *you!*"

I finished my explosive rant with tears streaming down my face and short on breath, just staring down at *the* Witch who had been my mother for effectively my entire life. Surprisingly - as she stared back up at me - Hushpuppy was crying too, her remaining hand covering her mouth. I had never tried to appeal to Hushpuppy's emotions before, so there was something actually extremely satisfying about having us both in tears for *once*.

"...I'm sorry." She pouted, looking away from me.

"It's okay. Just don't do it again."

"I was scared."

“Me too.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Yeah. Same.”

I felt the house shake a little bit and my heart leapt into my throat, “Oh shit did she find us?!” But Hushpuppy didn’t seem concerned.

“Nah. The house is just on the move. It’s been running to the West since I got trapped.”

“..”

“?”

“The... house can run?”

“Ya. It has legs, after all.”

“...The house has legs...!?! Wait! WHY DO WE WALK EVERYWHERE THEN!?!”

“Nooova... **fooooood.**” She’s impossible.

“...Fine!” I conceded as I helped Hushpuppy stand up and we dragged ourselves to the kitchen, broken and battered and bruised, but *together*.

\*\*\*

Dinner was made and dinner was eaten. Hushpuppy was in her room, resting on her rarely used bed. I didn’t enjoy the fact that I couldn’t dress her wounds, but she insisted that that would only slow down the regeneration process. Junius Hushani... it was a pretty name; a mysterious name. I thought it suited her quite well. I wonder what kind of Human she had been centuries ago. I wondered if we had met back then, if maybe we might’ve been friends. I sat nearby with a closed notebook that was one of many I had been using to keep track of the amazing and horrifying things that I’d seen in my life. That was an idea I had gotten from my friends in this city...

With our safety guaranteed for the moment, I finally let my mind wander to everything we had left behind. We had lived in and left from many, many cities and towns in the last 14 years I had been with Hushpuppy... but this was the first time that I really felt like I left a piece of my heart behind; a piece that broke off and shattered when the city itself was destroyed. Ari and Saya and Mia... I wonder if they’re okay. Saya and Mia’s farmland was South of the city and while the back end of Hushpuppy’s reality dividing slash would have been shorter than the front end... I prayed to the Four that they had evacuated. I prayed that everyone outside of the townsquare was able to evacuate. As long as they were still alive, they could start over... Humans were particularly good at that.

Hushpuppy

It took *six months* apparently for me to recover from all of the damage that the Pale One had done to me and forced me to do to myself. Regenerating that much damage almost made me resort to eating my emergency food, but I don't really need all of my limbs to catch a regular Fae. Once I was completely healed, Nova called a Witch's Tea Party... which was *not* something I knew she had **any** authority to do... but I guess she's been building up her own favours through her cleaning for them over the years. Nova insisted that *everyone* know just how dangerous Evelynn had become, that this wasn't just a matter of culling the weakest from our ranks; we were *all* in danger. It was *wild* how she handled the Tea Party that day...

I was suuuper proud of her. She was going to be a cool adult Human soon.

I wondered if Nova might resent me for what happened on that day. Even *I* could tell she had started to plant some roots in Okai- er, Solona. The moment that Evelynn Vandree's Magic touched down on me, that city was done for. It was not going to be inhabitable for a very long time. She threw down that Name-Binding Magic without mercy or restraint in the middle of a large city full of other Humans. She seemed to take pride in *being* a Human, but had even less regard for their lives than I did.

But I'm a Witch, what's her excuse?

Thankfully, Nova seemed to agree that this catastrophe was Evelynn's fault, not mine. So I was safe from getting yelled at by Nova a second time. Safe!

It was around the time of this impromptu Tea Party when the details of what had happened to Solona became widespread knowledge. Nova had gone to a nearby town while we were still laying low to gather rumors and pick up newspapers. She read various articles and reports to me over lunch one day, the headlines read as follows:

SOLONA WIPED OFF THE MAP IN MASSIVE FAE ATTACK!

SLAUGH CARVES THE KILOMETERS WIDE, LONG, AND DEEP CANYON INTO THE WESTERN BORDER!

THOUSANDS DEPOSED IN CATAclysmic FAE ATTACK; A NEW WEAPON EMERGES?!  
CARTOGRAPHERS NAME NEW UNINHABITABLE MAGIRRADIATED CANYON 'THE GREAT DIVIDE'

LIVING CORPSES OF MAGIC AND ASH RISE FROM THE GREAT DIVIDE

SLAUGH CROSSES DEAD ZONE FOR DEVASTATING ATTACK ON SOLONA

I leaned back in the chair behind the front desk, my teeth gritted like my mouth was full of dinner plates. I kinda expected to hear more about the city that had been absolutely destroyed during this fight... but uh... I guess I kinda forgot that in the heat of the moment I accidentally'd a new canyon. I think that Nova had sorta forgotten about that too, cause after she was done reading to me, she looked at me wide eyed, understanding the true origin of this *Great Divide*. I looked back at her and shrugged, the only thing I could think to say being:

*“Whoops.”*