

Junco

We meet on her thirteenth birthday. It's Autumn – the breezes that sweep through my open window are newly crisp and the harvest festival is biting at our heels. My own thirteenth birthday, a joyless affair in the stifling summer, is already three months gone.

I haven't been told to expect a roommate, so I'm a little surprised when she wafts in.

Even if I'd known to expect her, I would have been surprised. Her face is pale, ghostly white even, and her hair a similar silvery hue. Her green eyes, bright in her pale face, are large and deep set, childlike. Fear strikes me, briefly. Is this the ghost of some long-perished child?

It's her rough-hewn brown dress that grounds her in reality.

She hesitates at the door, eyeing the second bed.

I cock my head. "Hi there. I'm Gwen," I say.

"Rowena." Again, Rowena surprises me. Where I expected a youthful trill, her voice is low and sweet, honey-like. There's an intelligent gleam in her eyes as she regards me.

"You lost?" I ask.

Rowena glances around suddenly, as if this possibility is just suddenly occurring to her. "I don't think so. I think I'm your roommate? The Matron told me 'top floor, second room on the right.' Not very polite, is she?"

I grin in surprise. It's rare for someone to agree with me about the Matron's manners.

"She really isn't. Guess they must have filled the rest of the house then. They would hate to force some innocent girl to be my roommate."

"Oh?" she prompts, keeping her face neutral despite the warble of trepidation in her voice.

“I’m apprenticed to the blacksmith and most people find that – ah – off-putting. Since I’m a girl.” I maintain my grin as I speak, but I examine her face, looking for some form of the repulsion that I usually get. A rat of nerves gnaws at my stomach.

Rowena, for her part, seems calm as she drifts in and places her bag on bed across from mine.

“Well, you certainly look fine for the job. Smithing.” I noticed her eyes graze my arm and back muscles, which have already developed since I took the job this June. I resist the urge to shrink into myself.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I don’t beat people up.”

She laughs. “So you say.”

“I do. Anyway, who’s your master?”

There’s a pause before she answers. “Morgan.”

This time, I pause.

“You’re a sorceress.”

“Well, sorceress-in-training.”

Oh. So maybe the house isn’t full after all.

Rowena has her head down, busy with unpacking, but I can see her peeking through her hair, watching me carefully. Sorcery is *not* a celebrated profession. Magic is rare, and Morgan lives beyond the edge of the village, a master of mysteries. Villagers go to her in the dead of night, smelling of desperation. When Rowena graduates, does this mean that we’ll have two sorceresses? Is that safe?

I only realize that the fear creeping in my stomach has also crept into my face when Rowena tenses and squeezes her eyes shut, as if I might shout at her. As if she might cry.

As far as I know, Morgan has never done anything to a villager. Moreover, I recognize the anxiety carved into Rowena's brow. Just a moment ago, it had lived in my own face. I make a quick decision.

"That's amazing," I say. And I choose to mean it. Rowena jerks her head up to look at me, forgetting her cool act, eyes wide. "Sorry you got stuck in the undesirables' room though. It's so high up. It's the furthest walk."

Rowena has to fish for a response to my mundane comment. "Y-yes. It certainly is a trek."

"But we have the best view." I nod to the window. The Apprentice House is the tallest building in town, and our room looks over thatched roofs and the worn dirt roads that trail into fields and the yellow-red-orange wood beyond.

"Yes," Rowena says, not looking out the window as she grins. "We do."

We settle into a life that is hard to call normal. When we walk around town, people leave space around us, parting as if we might make them sick. Vendors give us higher prices, though our allowances are meager.

When we choose to attend meals in the communal dining room of the Apprentice Hall, the other kids cast glances at us, and when it's our turn to make dinner, attendance is halved. Even the new thirteen-year-olds know not to approach us.

Rowena is always hurt by this. She always tries to speak to them, and is always wounded when they leave. It doesn't roll off her back the way it does mine.

Some are not so bad, when I run into them alone. They smile or make small talk, and I am reminded of what it was like before I chose this path.

And unlike Rowena, born with magic, I did choose it. At twelve, when my mother kept talking of how I should work at the apothecary, I walked alone to the blacksmith. At his forge, I begged him to let me work for him. I could see shapes in metal, and I trusted my hands.

When I convinced him, I brought him to my parents to explain. My mother protested at first, but then nodded. The village was shocked of course, for the unorthodoxy. And then religion got involved. As it always does.

Was it a choice? Because I sometimes imagine the life my mother planned. The life I would have lived if I were weaker. Or maybe stronger. It is not that I wouldn't be happy. It is that I wouldn't be alive. In that life, I am screaming, clawing my way out of my own body. How could I bear the work of the apothecary, which does not draw sweat on the brow, requires no delicate strength, which lacks the smell of melting iron? And in this fantasy, this life where I am not hated, I do not keep my hair short. They hate that too. I do not wear breeches. In that life, I hunch, to hide how broad my shoulders are. They do not like my shoulders.

And in that life, of course, I am married to a man. I do not love this man. I know all the boys in the village and they are unlovable. And love may not be important. But in the life where I am married, my husband takes the money I earn, and he demands of me support, and he puts his hands on my body, and I hate him. I hate him every day and I hate the children that crawl out of me and I hate every inch of my body that he has brushed up against.

In that life, they do not tell me I am going to hell, but I am already there. At least in this one, none of the boys will take me, even if I wanted.

Yes, this was a choice. *Is* a choice. I choose to die by their hand rather than my own.

Perhaps the town would have gotten used to me. That's usually what happens. But before they could, I aligned myself with Rowena. Sorceresses – and those who would dally with them – are not forgivable.

Just another choice.

But I don't mind. I always choose Rowena.

Often, on our days off, we walk in the wood, enjoying the freedom to explore while out of everyone's scrutiny. I enjoy Spring warmth on my arms and air untainted by forge-smoke or sweat.

At fourteen, Rowena is already growing out of her little kid look. Her face is thinning to reveal high, sharp cheekbones, and her brow seems lower over her eyes. In the sun, dressed in a gossamer sorceress's dress, she almost glows.

"You look like a fae," I tell her, smiling as I watch her among the trees.

Rowena looks around and grins when she spots a bush with shiny dark green leaves and darker red berries. She plucks one gently and turns to look at me, chin low and eyes mischievous.

"Then eat a berry of the forest and we can dance until eternity ends," she says, quoting a common story. The moment is mystical, enticing, and flutters somewhere in my chest. I step closer to her, prepared to eat the berries from her fingers, but freeze when I catch a better look at them.

"Rowena," I gasp, batting the fruit out of her hand. "That's juniper! It's poisonous."

The berries fall just by Rowena's feet and her gaze follows. "Wow, you really would have been stuck here for eternity if you'd eaten those, huh?" She kicks the berries a little further into the underbrush, and then lets out an unexpected, sad sigh.

I look into the bushes, wondering what she noticed as she crouches and reaches into the plants. When she draws out her hands, she is cupping a tiny bird, lying on its back with outstretched wings and an arrow sticking out of its soft, snowy chest.

I frown. “That’s a junco,” I tell her. I know she knows this, but I’m stupid in surprise. “No one would bother eating that.” Why shoot it?

Rowena’s hands start to tremble as she whispers harried words in a language I don’t understand. I realize with a jolt that over this chanting, Rowena has started to cry. Her eyes glow bright. This worries in my brow, in the pit of my stomach. I don’t know what to do, don’t know how to shake her of this. I reach out for her.

When my hand touches Rowena’s shoulder, her words cut off, and she hurls the bird away. She stares to where it fell in the bushes, no longer visible, her eyebrows etched upwards in her face, every muscle taut.

“What was that?” I ask, trepidation in every syllable.

“Bad omen. That’s all.” With that, Rowena stands and continues down the path.

A year later, Rowena and I march through town, hoping to buy some bread or fruit so we can avoid dinner, and we bump into Richard, a younger boy. Literally, bump into him. I remember when he first came to the House, so scared of us both. Witches.

When he sees who bumped him, his face twists. He spits on the ground.

First, I’m surprised. Honestly. I’m about to shrug it off, but then I hear the noise Rowena makes. An inhalation. Like she’s been hit. Like she’s going to hit back. I don’t have to look at her to know the expression on her face.

Anger flares suddenly and burns behind my eyes. I square my shoulders, putting myself directly between the two. He doesn't get to see her hurt. I spit back, at his feet.

Then, I step forward, not thinking, and raise my hand to hit him, but he flinches. He throws his hands in front of his face. I am bigger than him, stronger than him. He is scared of us again.

Good.

It's time to go, so I herd Rowena along.

"You got angry," she murmurs to me.

"He had no right," I respond, still chewing on this sudden aching growl.

"But you normally don't get angry."

I consider this. She's almost right. "I get angry when it's you."

Rowena is silent, but she takes my hand. I let her. It is warm and small and soft. There is something more that I want or that I want to do, but I can't think of it. Instead, I put that want away, with the anger I don't have and the pain I don't feel. Like it doesn't exist.

Rowena jolts up in her bed. I've been watching her writhe for a while, making small mewling sounds.

She looks wildly around the room until she catches my gaze. I slide from my bed and pad across the room, sitting next to her. I pull her into my side. Her body is warm, too warm, almost. The touch reminds us both that though she is small, she is not gossamer. She is a person, weighted and rooted in this world. She will not unravel, and she will not be blown away.

"The dream again?"

Rowena nods, still breathing heavily. “I couldn’t stop myself, I couldn’t...And they – they–” She is trembling and unable to finish.

“It’s okay, I know,” I murmur, rubbing her back. And they died. It’s a dream she has over and over again. A mob comes to her door. She loses control of her power. She kills them all.

Rowena leans into my chest and I can feel warm tears through the fabric of my nightdress, uncomfortably damp. “Morgan said that when dreams repeat, they’re more likely to happen.”

I nod against her head. “She also said it can be metaphorical,” I try to sooth.

Rowena twists to frown at me. “Then what’s the metaphor?”

I wish I knew. With all my being I wish I understood that dream. I wish I could wipe away her fear. Our fear.

“I’m no sorcerer,” I answer with a shrug, trying to lighten my tone. “Anyway, there’s not much you can do about it right now. Focus on something happy.”

The bed is small and sticky in the summer air. As Rowena closes her eyes and takes deep breaths, I flop off her bed. The wood floor cools my calloused soles.

Rowena’s eyes flip open. “Oh! Look what I learned the other day!” She slips out of the bed as well, her bare feet barely making a sound. My breath catches as I watch her move – I think it’s awe, just at how graceful she is.

Rowena cups her hands and extends them to me. I lean forward a bit to see inside them.

After a beat, the space just above her lithe fingers starts to glow, and fills with soft ribbons of color dancing around each other. The glow grows and grows and the ribbons of light spill out of her hands, filling the room and forming a cocoon around me. Laughter bubbles up in

my chest as a warm feeling spreads from my core to my tips, sparkling and bright and clear. Everything is ecstatic. Like every hair on my body is standing on end.

“Rowena, wow!” I gasp, barely capable of saying more.

Finally, the colors start to recede, trickling back into Rowena’s hands. The dying glow illuminates her face for just a moment before it falls to black, and all I can see is the green of her eyes, glowing bright in the moonlight.

“That was beautiful,” I sigh, still catching my breath. Sometimes I think she only learns tricks.

“It’ll make your next few days lucky,” Rowena grins. The smile flickers and then falls away. “Happy birthday.” She looks absolutely miserable.

She’s right. It’s my birthday. My seventeenth, in fact. I’ll be moving out when the sun rises.

On the next Monday afternoon, Rowena sits in the smithy where I am now a full-fledged employee. The work hasn’t changed, but at the end of the day I go home to my own small apartment above the shop. After years of having a roommate, it is a deeply lonely space.

We’d both rather Rowena stay nights with me, but there’s a curfew for apprentices. It’s noticed when they don’t come home.

Rowena chatters as I whack metal around, molding it into something useful.

“And how can I sleep without you snoring there next to me?” Rowena is saying. “I’m too used to it.”

I smile at my work, content just to listen. Something painful in the way I miss her is assuaged by the way she misses me.

“Oh! And Morgan told me that I needed a staff! She said it could be any material, even wood, although metal’s better. At this rate, I’ll just use a tree branch.”

I look up at Rowena, whose eyes are raised too innocently up at the sooty ceiling.

“Hm,” I say, forcing my tone to sound unconcerned. “I hope you find a good a tree branch.”

“Gwen!” Rowena whines, dropping the act and looking at me. The sides of her mouth curl down as she tries to pout around stifled laughter.

In the end, I break first, giggling just a little. “Okay, okay, I’ll make you one – in my free time.” The last bit is directed towards the smith, working on the other side of the shop. He waves a hand of acknowledgment towards me, but otherwise doesn’t react. Rowena ducks her head, aware that he never really talks to us when she’s here.

Even he draws some sort of line.

“Thanks Gwen,” she says, the laughter gone from her voice. Something tightens in my chest, and I wonder if something is tightening in hers, and the air is full of unsaid things.

In the end, I break first. “It’s just a staff,” I murmur, drawing my gaze down to the anvil in front of me. I haul my hammer up behind my head and let its weight crash down into molten metal.

That night she comes up with me for dinner in my apartment. As I clean a chicken, she peels potatoes at the table and talks softly.

“I hate her, Gwen, I truly do.” But there is no passion in her voice, in her body, which sags against the chair. Defeat, more like.

My little kitchen seems too small to contain all the mist and misery that pours from her little body.

“Only three more months, and then no more roommate,” I murmur, as if two months is short time, as if it makes it bearable. As if a deadline makes Rowena’s pain inconsequential.

As if she wants to move to the edge of town with no one but Morgan to keep her company.

“True,” she answers, more a breath than a word. “But I just – living with someone who hates you, I –” Her rising voice suddenly cuts off. “Last night, when she came home, she looked tired, so I tried to do a revitalization spell for her. The one that summons a little bird to fly around you and she just – just batted it out of the air. Killed it. And I – I –”

Rowena has frozen mid-peel, so preoccupied that I don’t think she knows she’s crying. I put down my chicken and wrest the knife and potato from her hands. She doesn’t notice.

Her hands are cold under mine, and soft. I could run my rough dry fingers over her skin forever.

“They’re all like that. I hate them,” Rowena snarls. I jolt up to look at her face again, which curled while I was thinking about her skin. Her eyes burn dangerously and she suddenly seems to radiate heat. She slams her hands down on my wood table.

I don’t think she sees me anymore.

Cold flips and bubbles in my stomach. I have to do something. I wrap my arms around her, and grip her tight into my chest.

The touch works. Rowena dissolves into tears, and I rock her shaking frame, feeling her small shoulders press into my arms. I focus on her weight, her solidity, on her breaths against mine, to keep me from crying too.

“I can’t stand it without you,” Rowena gasps, twisting and pushing her face into my neck.
“What’s going to happen to me?”

The evening bells toll, and curfew is called.

After Rowena leaves, I notice two black handprints burned into my tabletop.

It takes weeks to forge the staff. I work at night, my only light the coals and candles.

She still takes dinner with me every evening, and she starts to gain weight. Too little, too late. She’ll always be small, I think. Always a little fragile.

Still, my joy at seeing the red flush in her cheek – put there by my food – is tempered by the dark silk slips under her eyes and the way she absentmindedly drags her nails up and down her arms.

“It’s bad luck that someone turned thirteen right after I moved out,” I say once. It takes little guesswork to know why she’s been picking up nervous tics.

Rowena looks down and shakes her head. “She turned thirteen a bit ago, but the House was full. The only bad luck is that you grew up.”

In the last week it takes me to finish, she doesn’t come as often. I ask once where she goes and she shrugs. “The forest. The river. It’s calm out there.”

It’s okay, because it gives me time to work on the staff in the evenings. I find myself skipping dinner. The swing of the hammer drives away my thoughts and hunger.

I wanted to make it in silver, but I can’t afford that. So, I make it in iron. The work is painstaking. Shaping, weighing, adjusting, shaping, weighing, adjusting. And then, the details. Up the shaft, I engrave leaves and flowers, to remind her of our walks in the woods. They are

small and delicate, and I walk away from them with a thick headache and fear that I'll go blind. The top of the staff includes a flourish of interweaving metal bands, each thinner than my pinky, with leaves emerging from them.

When I go to bed at night, I am exhausted. Which is good. I fall asleep right away then. I don't think of her. I don't think of the nights we used to lie awake and whisper across the room. I don't think of the nights we used to lie in bed and try to catch the glimmer of each other's eyes in the moonlight. I don't think of the nights she used to crawl into my bed and we would lie, very close and very still – as if not to frighten something. I don't think of listening to each other breathe in the dark and of clutching onto those moment like they were secrets from our daytime selves. I don't think of her own sleepless nights. I don't think of her helpless before a town who doesn't want her, and a future she doesn't want.

These nights where I work very hard and sleep right away, these are the nights that I don't miss her.

The staff is not finished until her hand closes around it. The metal gleams like it *is* pure silver, and the flowers and leaves seem to breath and shake and settle.

I was anxious that it wasn't right, that it wouldn't work, but as soon as she holds it, I know it's perfect.

The smell of smoke draws my attention to town. Out here in the woods, I usually can't smell the smoke of the village. But now, the scent is heavy.

I turn to see the rise of thick black clouds. Even just the sight of them is suffocating. I am already starting back to town, too stunned to run, when I step on something. It is soft and thick and cracks beneath my shoe.

A bird. A small, white bird, with an arrow protruding from its chest. A red flower grows around the weapon, bleeds into the feathers.

Now I run.

Town is hot, blisteringly so. The Apprentice House is bright and crackling, roaring. The sun is blacked out by smoke, but the House has replaced it. It sears my eyes.

Teens stumble out, faces smeared black and hacking coughs. All but one are accounted for. Villagers frantically try to stop the inferno from spreading. The nearby houses are catching.

Some of the villagers are organizing. I hear them faintly over the flames. They're calling Rowena's name. They're going to find her.

I have to find her first.

Back to the woods. Back to running.

When I find her, she is hunched, collapsed, by the river. As if she can barely hold up her own weight. Even in the darkness, her staff glimmers where it's been discarded behind her.

Mist toils from the water, so heavy that at first, I miss the girl stretched a few feet away.

My limbs go numb and I dash to the child, kneeling beside her. She is passed out, but breathing, her eyelids fluttering. Her heartbeat is rapid and faint. Her face is soot-blackened, so it takes me a breath to recognize her corn-silk hair and cupid's bow mouth. Anwen. Rowena's roommate. She's only thirteen. She looks young, unformed.

She does not scare me.

Knowing she's alive, I turn my attention to Rowena. I murmur her name, barely more than a breath.

She turns to me, slowly, mechanically. Almost blindly. Her eyes burn a furious green, so bright I cannot see her pupils. Her silver hair drapes over her shoulders and cheeks. An empty smile hangs on her face. She is untouched by the ash she created, though I can smell smoke from her. She is beautiful.

I might throw up.

"Rowena." I choke on the word, and crawl over to her, moving slowly and not standing. When I am close enough, I lay my hand on her shoulder.

She breaks first.

Her eyes stop glowing and her smiles falls away and she gazes at me in frenzied horror, pulling herself away from my hand, into her own body. She claws at her hair and squeezes her eyes shut. Tears press out from their corners.

"It's true, they're happening, what she said, it was so cruel I – I did it, I'm a – it's true," she mutters, her voice hoarse and desperate. I am cold all over.

"Rowena–"

"Gwen, the dreams. I didn't stop them. Gwen," she keens, opening her eyes and gazing at me. They search my face. Distraught.

I grasp her forearms, and feel her grasp mine. Here, we are solid. We are human.

"They're not true yet." My voice is fierce. I will keep her rooted to this ground.

"Nobody's dead. You can still save them. Save her." I fight the urge to look at Anwen, to check how she's doing. All that matters now is Rowena's eyes.

Rowena shakes her head and tries to pull back, but my grip on her arms is too strong.
“And then what? They’ll kill me. And if they don’t then – then I go and live in a little hut, alone?
Like Morgan? Knowing everyone hates me? Just let them kill me. I can barely control it, I—”

She cuts off, choking on tears.

She’s right, of course.

Everything, everything that I pushed down and aside for all my life, that I decided not to feel, boils under my skin. Pulses. It burns in my throat, like a scream waiting to happen. I am so angry. I am so *angry*. Too angry to think of a different word. I hate them. I hate them I hate them I hate them. How dare they, how dare they do this to her, to *us*? I realize that the grip I have on Rowena is too strong, too furious. It’ll leave marks.

But something ragged and snarling in my chest won’t let go.

“No,” I say. I *seethe*. “We’re going. We’re *leaving*. You won’t hurt anyone, because they won’t hurt you. Not anymore.” I stand, hauling Rowena up with me. She is staring at me in awe, too shocked to cry anymore. She sways for a moment and I hold her up as she finds her footing.

I shove a finger in Anwen’s direction, still not breaking eye contact with Rowena.
“You’re going to save that little girl. Even if she was scared. And cruel. You’re going to do it because fuck your nightmares, fuck your fate. You’re going to do it because you’re better than what they think of you. And then we’re going to make a home together.”

Rowena trembles. Her eyes flit around my face, searching for – I don’t know. Some hint of lie, some lack of resolve maybe. Some possibility that I’ll abandon her.

She doesn’t find it.

Her face clears, her eyebrows coming down over her eyes and her mouth calming into a straight line. She nods. And kneels, next to Anwen. And she breathes over her face, a dark grey

breath that caresses Anwen's cheeks and restores the pink in them. Anwen lets out a gasp, and though she doesn't wake up, her breathing evens.

Rowena stands.

"It's time we go," she says, firmer and calmer than I have ever heard her.

Sounds of trampling and shouts announce the nearby approach of the mob. I almost want to stay. I want to see Rowena destroy them, and I want to help. I could rip each one apart with my bare hands. This certainty, pounds over me like waves, like blood beating in my ears. I am strong and Rowena is powerful; they can't hurt us.

How did I not see before, how angry I am?

But.

But more than I want to hurt them, I want Rowena to sleep at night.

It's time we go.

I meet her eyes again, and nod.

Rowena steps closer to me, and finally, *finally*, she presses her mouth against mine. For a moment, we kiss, deep and tender and passionate and desperate. And loving.

When that anger and pain came tumbling out, so did this. This desperate craving need, this void in me shaped exactly like Rowena's fingers. Like her mouth. It is as hungry as the anger. As fierce.

This is right. Finally. Finally.

How did I not kiss her every day of our lives? How did I survive?

We break apart and the villagers are close. Rowena's eyes are glowing again, but her expression is hers. We hold hands and step across the river, feet never falling through the water. Rain starts to fall, and I don't know if that is Rowena or luck.

It is cold on our skin. Refreshing.

We hear the villagers find Anwen, but we are already in the trees.

We are never seen again.