THE THICKETY
The Last Spell
ALSO BY J. A. WHITE

The Thickety: A Path Begins
The Thickety: The Whispering Trees
The Thickety: Well of Witches
For the Goffins:

Kim, Vinny, Andrew, Matthew, Hailey
Martay grasped the hilt of his cry-sword and waited for death. It would not be long now. The famous glass walls of Ta’men Keep were as strong as stone but couldn’t keep the Spider Queen’s creations out forever; he could see them milling just outside, testing the building for weaknesses. Colored panes distorted their monstrous shapes, creating impossibly tall silhouettes with curved claws and stalactite teeth.

*Or maybe those aren’t distortions at all, Martay thought. Maybe that’s their true appearance.*
He wondered—and not for the first time—how he had come to be here. Unlike his older brothers, Martay had never wanted to be a soldier. Since childhood he had dreamed of becoming an apprentice to a Master Glassblower and learning the secrets that had made Lux the wealthiest region in Sentium. His family had not been influential enough to secure him such a coveted position, however, and with no other options he had enlisted in the city guard. It had not been such a bad life at first. Ta’men Briel was a city at peace, and mindless drills and guard duty seemed a small price to pay in order to provide a stable life for Yonda and their baby girl, Wix. Martay’s childhood dreams remained unfulfilled, but he had found a new purpose in his daughter’s eyes.

And then the entire world had changed.

At first it had only been rumors, easily dismissed. A beautiful sorceress with eyes like cracked glass. Hideous monsters. Entire towns destroyed overnight. As the Spider Queen made her way across Sentium and gathered witches to her cause, however, her existence became irrefutable. Since
nearly killing the graycloak leader Timoth Clen in a fierce battle up north, her army had been sighted in the most obscure places: a mining town reclaimed by pines; the last remaining Ice Swamp; burnt remains of an ancient cathedral.

Rygoth was searching for something.

The Curators of Lux had gathered in Ta’men Keep and consulted forgotten texts written in dead languages, desperate to find out what could be so important to this new enemy. As a result of their investigation, a small chest was dragged up from the vaults and placed under vigilant guard. Martay could see it now at the opposite end of the hall, sitting on a tall pedestal. The chest was circular and constructed from red nosidian, a rare, nearly indestructible crystal that took centuries to form.

There was no keyhole, no lid. It was never meant to be opened.

Rumor had it that the chest held one-quarter of an ancient weapon called the *Vulkera*. No one knew the exact nature of this weapon, only that its four sections, when
joined together again, would grant the Spider Queen unimaginable power. Just a few months ago, Martay would have scoffed at the thought, but that was before magic had escaped the stories and woven itself into the fabric of their world. Legends and lore, however far-fetched, could no longer be ignored.

They had to keep the chest from Rygoth at all costs.

A thunderous boom shook the Keep as something struck the towering doors. Martay heard the soldier to his right—a mirror-bender’s son, if he remembered true—let out a single, involuntary sob.

“Hold steady!” shouted High Swordsman Bellamy, a bear of a man with a beard thick enough to nest a family of birds. “Remember your orders!”

The doors, struck again, rattled in their frame.

Martay tensed with anticipation. He heard the soldier behind him mutter a prayer beneath his breath.

“Draw your weapons!” Bellamy shouted.

Martay’s turquoise cry-sword, a marvel of crystal-smithing as strong as steel and half its weight, made a
sound like tinkling glass as he withdrew it from its sheath. He was a passable swordsman at best, but a grizzled old veteran called Two-Toes had promised Martay that skill mattered only on the practice field. In a true battle, whether he lived or died would come down to instinct and luck. The words were not reassuring.

Past the mirror-bender’s son, whose single sob had escalated into a series of quiet whimpers, Martay saw that new silhouettes, human in appearance, had joined the monsters still pressed against the outside walls of the Keep.

As one, these new arrivals opened the books in their hands.

“Gr-gr-grimoires,” said the mirror-bender’s son, following Martay’s gaze. His eyes danced like sparks off an anvil. “That’s what they call ’em. Heard that from a peddler who passed through the ruins of Gildefroid. Told me what happened there, he did—what a book like that can do in the hands of someone with—”

The great doors rattled more violently, as though a
particularly fierce storm had grown hands and learned how to push. Soldiers took fighting stances. High Swordsman Bellamy barked orders. A chandelier of flickering shard-glass swung from side to side, shifting the hall from light to darkness, darkness to light.

*Here they come*, Martay thought, waiting for the doors to explode open and unleash Rygoth’s forces into the hall. He clenched his cry-sword tightly and pictured his daughter’s face.

The attack came from the sides.

It was only afterward that Martay pieced together what had happened. While the soldiers’ attention had been fixed on the doors, magic had enabled Rygoth’s monstrosities to pass through the exterior walls and into the Keep. The subsequent battle, if indeed it could be called that, was over in minutes. The Spider Queen’s abomina-tions blanketed the surprised soldiers like a mist of death, leaving behind nothing but armored corpses.

Martay found himself on the floor, a dull wetness
spreading across his stomach. He had been bitten, or clawed, or impaled with a horn. It had happened too quickly for him to make sense of it. He touched his wound and his hand came away an irrevocable red.

The doors yawned open. Rygoth glided into the chamber.

Her beauty—undeniable but frightening—was that of a swooping hawk or raging bonfire. She wore a spotless white gown with gloves that extended to her elbows. Her cracked eyes were a collage of colors, like a stained-glass window that had shattered and then been reassembled by a madman.

Three girls entered the Keep behind her. Two of them were identical in every way, with straight glaucous hair and eyes as cold as polished moonstones. The third girl was younger and had dark skin. When she saw the carnage that filled the hall her lips quivered, building toward a full-fledged scream, but then Rygoth looked her way and the girl’s face immediately slipped into an impassive
mask. She shrugged, as though the deaths meant nothing to her.

*She’s pretending to be one of them,* Martay thought. *Why?*

Rygoth’s eyes locked onto the red chest at the end of the hall.

“I can feel the grim’s power from here,” she said, starting forward.

Boar-like monsters with obsidian tusks repositioned the bodies that blocked Rygoth’s way, clearing a narrow path from one side of the Keep to the other. Martay bit back a scream as something dug its teeth into his calf and dragged him across the floor. He forced his body to go completely slack, playing dead. Once the creature released him, Martay opened his eyes just the tiniest bit and watched the witches through a haze of eyelashes.

“Everyone leave,” Rygoth said.

There was a flurry of motion as monsters stampeded through the front entrance. Before the dark-skinned girl could join this sudden exodus, however, the Spider
Queen’s prismatic eyes clamped down on her like a vice.

“Everyone except you, Safi. There are matters we need to discuss.”

The girl stood with bowed head as the hall emptied out. The twins were the last to leave, every step in perfect sync. Before closing the large doors behind them, they paused to look back at Safi and shared a knowing smile.

A silence like that of a graveside vigil descended over the hall.

“It’s unfortunate that it was rumors and whispers that led us here, and not one of your visions,” Rygoth said.

Safi followed a few paces behind the Spider Queen. Though she gave the appearance of being deferential, Martay noticed how close the girl’s hand remained to the grimoire knotted to her belt.

*She wants to be ready in case she needs to use it*, he thought.

“I know that I’ve failed you thus far, my queen,” Safi replied, “but—”
“Perhaps if we were searching for a single grimoire I might find your failure—not acceptable, certainly, but understandable. Needle in a haystack and all that. Only we haven’t been searching for a single grimoire. The Vulkera, as you well know, has been split into four sections, four grims. Surely you should have found at least one of them by now.”

“I’m getting closer,” Safi said. “There’s a second grim not too far from here. I saw it in a vision last—”

“Where?”

“I just need a little more time.”

“So you’ve said. Repeatedly.”

“I’ve never had to control what the visions show me before,” Safi said. “A few mistakes are to be expected.”

“More than a few,” Rygoth said. “For a year now, you’ve been leading us to every corner of Sentium. If I didn’t know any better, I might suspect that you were lying to me in order to buy time for that meddlesome friend of yours to find the grims on her own.”
Martay held his breath as the witches passed right by his head, their boot heels clacking sharply against the stone floor.

“Kara Westfall is not my friend,” Safi insisted. “I could have helped her at Clen’s Graveyard, but I remained by your side. I serve you and no other. You know it’s the truth—you’ve been inside my mind!”

Safi was doing her best to sound confident, but Martay heard a twinge of nervousness in her voice.

“And what a fascinating mind it is,” the Spider Queen said. “Not the slightest hint of betrayal—or doubt, even. Every thought is a paragon of perfect loyalty.” She stroked Safi’s hair with the back of her gloved hand. “And to think you were once my enemy. The change in you is truly . . . unbelievable.”

Martay risked turning his head for a better view and found himself face-to-face with the mirror-bender’s son. The boy bore an expression of mild surprise, as though dying had been an unexpected but not entirely shocking
turn of events. Martay wished he had taken the time to learn his name.

*How many Luxians died today? How many more will die if she lives?*

Anger anesthetized Martay’s wound. He slowly rose to his feet. At the end of the hall, the Spider Queen was examining the nosidian chest, her back to him. She waved her hand over the lid and a shower of translucent worms fell from her fingertips. Black smoke rose as their acidic bodies began to burn through the chest.

*Now’s my chance, Martay thought, inching closer. While she’s distracted.*

Rygoth slowly removed her gloves. From this distance Martay could see that one of her hands was swollen and misshapen, with a red welt on its palm from a stinger’s kiss. She reached through the hole that the worms had created and withdrew a rectangular flap of leather. It was rose-colored, with the petals of a flower embossed into its surface. If Martay had seen the contents of the chest
yesterday he might have thought the Curators had made some sort of mistake, for this scrap of leather did not look like a weapon at all. He knew better now.

*It’s the cover of a grimoire.*

“*I can feel the power thrumming through it like an underground river,*” Rygoth said. “*And this is just one grim. When I have all four . . .*”

She turned to Safi. Her lips contorted into a cruel smile.

“*I know that you’ve been faking your visions, Safi. You might somehow be able to hide your true thoughts, but you can’t conceal the hatred in your eyes. You’re trying to keep me from my book.*”

Safi took a step back, both hands on her grimoire now.

“*Don’t be ridiculous, my queen,*” she said weakly. “*I only wish to be your faithful—*”

Rygoth waved her entreaties away.

“*It’s not your fault. Your entire life has been built upon a foundation of lies. ‘Do the right thing.’ ‘Help*
your fellow man.’ But there is no joy to be found there, only servitude to a false nature. Humans yearn to destroy one another. Just look around you. Do you think these swords and bows are to keep the peace? Of course not! Men invented war so they could kill as they please and call it ‘honor.’ At least I’m honest about my intentions. I kill because I like it.”

Martay took another step forward and Rygoth’s head jerked upward, like a deer hearing a predator in the brambles. He paused in midstride, certain that she was about to spin around and end his pathetic assassination attempt, but she continued talking as though nothing had happened. Martay nearly collapsed with relief.

Almost there, he thought, taking another step forward. His arms shook as he struggled to keep his cry-sword from dragging along the ground. He was still losing blood, growing weaker by the moment.

“Once the Vulkera is whole again,” Rygoth said, “my reach will extend to everyone’s mind at once, like the
rays of the moon. And what a gift I shall bring them! All people will finally understand that love and compassion are nothing but lies. They will embrace their desire for violence and become the monsters they were meant to be. A better world is coming, Safi. With your help—or without it.”

Martay stepped into position.

Now!

Drawing back his sword, he tensed his arms for a horizontal slash that would sever the Spider Queen’s head from her body. It never happened. A cold presence invaded his mind and he froze in place, unable to move. Rygloth looked back at him with an amused expression, as though he were an ill-tempered child who had attempted to kick her shin.

“Why are you trying to be a hero when you are so ill-suited to the role?” she asked him, looking away from the young witch for only a moment.

It was enough.
Sensing an opportunity that might never come again, Safi snatched the grim and ran toward the tall doors behind the pedestal.

*Where are you going?* Martay wondered. *Rygoth’s army is waiting for you. There’s nowhere to run.*

Except the girl, he now saw, had no intention of fleeing through a door made by human hands. Still running, she opened her spellbook and read strange words in no recognizable language. A magic portal, hazy with purple light, popped into existence just a few yards in front of her. Safi put on a final burst of speed, leaping through the air at the last moment so she could dive headfirst into the portal. Her outstretched hands vanished into the light.

That was as far as she got.

There was a loud crack, like a tree falling, and the stone floor buckled into a giant hand that snatched Safi from the air. Her grimoire slipped from her grasp along with the rose-colored grim.

From the darkened corners of the Keep stepped the twins. Martay wondered when they had reentered,
assuming they had truly left at all. From what he had gathered, this had all been a plan to expose the young witch as a traitor.

“What a surprise,” Rygoth said coldly, as one of the twins rushed to return the grim to her. “Our little seer isn’t as loyal as she seems. Such a waste of talent.” She smiled. “Throw her in the Stinging Cell. Perhaps she’ll have a change of heart. If not, there are other ways to find the last three grims.”

The stone hand relaxed its grip and Safi slammed to the floor. The twins each took an arm and started to drag her away, but the little witch didn’t make it easy. She kicked and scratched with strength that belied her age.

“Kara’s going to stop you!” Safi screamed, all pretense of loyalty dropped. “She did it once and she’ll do it again! I bet she’s looking for the grims right now. Knowing Kara, I wouldn’t be surprised if she already—”

The twins dragged Safi through the open door and into the night.

For a long time after that, the Spider Queen stood with
her back to Martay, breathing deeply. Safi’s betrayal—or perhaps her final words—had struck a nerve. When she turned around to face him, her fragmented eyes were cold with fury.

So this is how I die, Martay thought. At least Yonda and Wix are safe. That’s all that matters. He had sent them to a distant aunt the moment he learned that the Spider Queen’s forces were heading in their direction. Martay suddenly remembered that it was Wix’s fifth birthday next week and he had not yet chosen a gift for her. He hoped that Yonda would find something special and say it was from him.

Picturing them in his mind’s eye, a smile crept across his face. He was ready.

“I feel your love for them, hero,” Rygoth said with disgust. “Your precious family. But don’t you understand? Love is weakness. All you’re doing is showing me the exact spot to strike.”

There was a tugging in his mind and all memory of Yonda and Wix vanished.
The effect on Martay was devastating. His wife and child were the foundation of his entire existence, and without them his interior world collapsed inward like a tent whose poles had been removed. His mind was crushed to scattered fragments, and his heart shriveled to a black pebble capable only of despair.

“What have you done to me?” Martay asked, trembling. He felt frozen from the inside out.

“Wix has such pretty hair,” Rygoth said.

Though he could not say why, the name filled Martay with crushing sadness.

“Who’s Wix?” he asked, tears streaming from his eyes.

The Spider Queen laughed and left him alone with a dead army and an empty red chest. Though Martay remained a living statue, his wounds continued to bleed. He died just before morning but went mad long before then, his mind snapping beneath the magnitude of all that he had lost.
Book One

THE HOURGLASS TOWER

“The seeds of the future are buried in the past.”

—The Last Days of Kronia

Author Unknown
Kneeling by the stream, Kara cupped her hands together and splashed water on her face, grimacing as pinpricks of ice stung her cheeks. Her reflection rippled in the moonlight: dark circles under darker eyes, hair lank and wild.

*I look like a witch*, she thought, chuckling to herself.

The starry night was ripe for introspection, and Kara found her mind wandering to the strange events that had brought her to this place. She could trace the main path of her journey—growing up among the Children of the
Fold, her travels through the Thickety, sailing to Sentium in order to stop Rygoth, regaining her powers in the Well of Witches, the battle in the graveyard—but quite a few of the details escaped her. *Wexari* magic required memories to work, and her mind was littered with blank spaces, like patches of dead grass in an otherwise fertile field.

Behind her, footsteps crunched through a thin crust of snow.

“Evening, Darno,” Kara said.

The wolf regarded her with amber eyes. His scorpion tail was curled in a tight spiral, the stinger tucked into a fold of fur.

*The night is quiet*, Darno thought, and Kara heard the words in her head as clearly as if he had spoken them aloud.

“Quiet is good,” Kara said. “Right?”

*Not good quiet. The quiet before the leap.*

“I don’t follow.”

Darno sent her a vision of a taloned, apelike creature
swinging silently through the treetops of the Thickety, waiting to pounce upon the innocent paarn below it.

“You think we’re being hunted?” Kara asked.

Yes.

“Have you seen someone? Something?”

Not seen. Felt.

Darno had survived for years in the Thickety before Rygoth stole him away, so Kara was not about to dismiss his finely honed instincts. She couldn’t justify abandoning a good hideaway based on a feeling, however—not without confirmation.

“Let me see what’s out there,” she said.

Kara extended her thoughts to dozens of creatures in the vicinity: birds mostly, for these made the best sentries, but also rodents skittering through the undergrowth and even a lumbering bear. Some animals welcomed Kara into their minds, but the stubborn ones required her to spend a memory in order to construct a bridge between them. For a hatchling who had just learned to fly: lifting
Taff into the air so he can clothespin Father’s shirt to the line. With a hungry squirrel she shared the taste of freshly picked hushfruit.

Once inside their minds, Kara searched the animals’ memories. They hadn’t seen anything unusual.

“I think you’re just being your overprotective self,” Kara suggested to Darno. Since she had rescued the wolf from Rygoth he had been a constant shadow by her side, baring his teeth at every branch snap. Then again, she supposed he had good reason to be paranoid: Rygoth wouldn’t rest until she was dead, and now Grace was loose in the world as well.

“There’s a blizzard in the air,” Kara said. “Maybe that’s what has you on edge.”

Darno nudged her shoulder.


Kara sighed. At times, Darno’s constant vigilance could grow tiresome. When she had professed these feelings to her brother, his face had brightened instantly:
“Now you know how I feel around you!”

“Give me another moment in the cold air,” said Kara. “I need my senses about me before I head back inside and give the spell another go.”

Not that it will matter, she thought. We’re trying to do the impossible!

She cupped her hands beneath the surface of the pond, intending to splash her face, and fell backward with surprise.

The reflection in the water was not her own.

Darno rose up on his haunches, scorpion tail uncurled and rattling violently. Kara placed a hand on his flank.

“It’s okay,” she said. Now that the initial shock was over, she recognized the girl instantly. “That’s Bethany. She’s a friend.”

Darno glared down at the image in the pellucid stream. Kara understood the wolf’s doubt. Though they could only see Bethany from the chest up, it was enough to reveal the double-fanged spider sewn into her black
robe. She appeared to be a loyal follower of Rygoth.

Kara knew differently.

“I never got to thank you for saving us that night,” Kara said. “If you hadn’t reflected the twins’ spell back at them we’d all be dead right now.”

Bethany waved Kara’s words away. The motion should have caused the water to ripple, but it remained eerily still.

“You saved me from becoming the monster of Nye’s Landing,” Bethany said. “You brought me back into the light. I owe you a debt that can never be repaid.”

“You’re giving me too much credit. All I did was point you in the right direction.”

“You know it was more than that.”

Kara poked the stream with a single index finger. Concentric circles spread across the water but Bethany’s image remained undisturbed, as though she were a solid form floating just beneath the surface.

“How are you doing this?” Kara asked.
“A particularly useful quirk of my grimoire,” Bethany said. “I don’t know if you remember, but the pages aren’t like regular pages.”

“They’re mirrors,” Kara said.

“Mirrors that cast the reflection I choose. All I have to do is look into a page and picture the face I want to see. The grimoire does the rest. The tricky part is that the other person has to touch the mirror in order for me to see them. Or water—any reflective surface will work.”

“It’s a crafty bit of magic, Bethany,” Kara said. “But you have to be careful not to overuse the grimoire. It can take hold of you before you realize it.”

“I know. But you helped me resist it once, and that’s given me the strength I need to refuse its call.”

Kara nodded, remembering her own experience. A grimoire’s dark influence was powerful, but it could be subdued by a strong enough will.

“Now that I’ve created a link between us,” Bethany continued, “you can call on me if you need to. Touch
any reflective surface with two fingers and picture my face . . . just don’t let your thumb touch anything or the spell won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“I have no idea,” Bethany said, throwing her hands into the air. “It doesn’t make any sense!”

“I know,” Kara said. “Magic is so weird sometimes, isn’t it?”

Both girls burst into laughter.

It felt so good to talk to someone who understood. Kara wished that Bethany were here with her right now. She often longed for the company of witches—the good ones, at least.

“Where are you?” Kara asked.

“I’m not sure, to be honest with you,” Bethany said. “We’ve been traveling the same road for days. I just follow along, keep my head down. Everyone’s asleep right now.” She leaned forward, peering behind Kara. “All I see behind you are some treetops and Rygoth’s wolf.
Actually, I guess your wolf now.”

“Darno is not anyone’s wolf.”

“The point is, you could be anywhere that has trees and wolves. That’s about all I want to know, just in case Rygoth decides to poke around in my head at some point. In fact, don’t tell me anything important at all.”

“What if she finds out you contacted me?”

“She won’t. I blend in with the other witches so well, I’m not sure Rygoth even knows I exist. All my life I’ve wanted people to notice me, but I just vanished into the background. I thought I was cursed.” Bethany smiled slyly, making her look like a completely different girl. “Now I’m starting to think it’s a talent.”

“Still, Bethany. You’re taking a big risk talking to me.”

“I had to. There’s something you need to know.” She paused, looking away. “It’s bad.”

Kara folded her legs and leaned against Darno for warmth.

“Tell me,” she said.
“You heard about what happened at Ta’men Keep, right?”

Kara shook her head. “Been avoiding towns and people. Makes it difficult to keep up with what’s going on in the world.”

“I’ll give you the short version,” Bethany said. “Rygoth attacked the Keep and killed everyone inside it. They were guarding a grim.”

“What’s that?”

“A section of Princess Evangeline’s grimoire—which Rygoth calls the Volker.”

Kara felt ridiculous. All these weeks trying to locate the princess’s grimoire, and she hadn’t even known it had a special name.

“And she has this . . . grim now?” Kara asked.

“Yes.”

“How did she find it?” asked Kara. She leaned forward as a horrible thought occurred to her. “Was it Safi?”

“No!” Bethany snapped. “Rygoth just followed a trail
of clues that led . . . How could you even think that Safi would help her?"

Kara could tell, given Bethany’s defensive attitude, that the girls had become good friends during their two months together. *More than two months,* Kara reminded herself, forgetting to account for her time-stretching days in the Well of Witches. *Safi has been Rygoth’s captive for over a year, which means Bethany has known Safi longer than I have at this point.*

“I hate doubting her,” Kara said. “She’s my friend, too. But I know how tempting the darkness of magic can be. You understand, Bethany. I know you do.” Even in the water, Kara could see the other girl’s cheeks flush slightly. “Besides, if Safi was still . . . herself . . . why did she attack me at the graveyard?”

“Because Safi knew that she could do the most good by staying,” Bethany said. “By attacking you and remaining by the Spider Queen’s side she demonstrated her unquestioning loyalty. After that, Rygoth really started to trust
her—which allowed Safi to lead her all over Sentium, following false visions.”

Guilt warmed Kara’s numb cheeks. She had been so certain that Safi was caught in the thrall of dark magic and required rescuing. Instead, the younger girl, through courage and guile, had done more to stall Rygoth’s schemes than Kara.

_Taff never lost faith in her. I won’t either, after this._

“How did Safi hide the truth from her?” Kara asked.

“Rygoth can see into people’s minds.”

“That was my doing, actually,” Bethany said, with no little pride. “I put these _mind mirrors_—that’s what we called them—in Safi’s mind, so that every time Rygoth took a peek she saw a girl who worshipped her utterly and completely. But of course what Rygoth was really seeing was a reflection of how she feels about herself.”

“That’s brilliant,” Kara said.

“That’s brilliant,” Bethany said, a sad smile on her face.
A particularly fierce wind bit through Kara’s cloak. She leaned into Darno, seeking warmth.

“What’s wrong?” Kara asked.

“Rygoth figured out the truth,” Bethany said. “She imprisoned Safi.”

“But she can’t hurt her,” Kara said. “She needs Safi to find the rest of the grims.”

“Rygoth claims she has another way. And since she found Ta’men Keep without Safi’s help, I think she might be right.”

Kara thought about this. If Rygoth truly didn’t need Safi’s help anymore, there was no reason for her to keep the girl alive.

“We’re coming to rescue both of you,” Kara said. “The grims can wait.”

“No!” Bethany exclaimed. “Don’t waste your time on us—Rygoth has the first grim already! You need to find the other three!”

“But—”
“Did Safi ever tell you about the vision she had? About what happens if Rygoth uses the Vulkera’s power?”

Kara nodded, remembering. *Rygoth, grimoire in hand, standing on a mountain of bones. That’s all that will be left of the world.*

“Then you know what’s at stake,” Bethany said. “The only thing that matters is keeping the Vulkera out of Rygoth’s hands. Nothing else is important.”

Kara knew that Bethany was right. But she hated the thought of leaving her friends in danger.

“I’ll find the grims first,” Kara said. “And then I’ll come for you.”

“Don’t worry about us, Kara,” Bethany said. “Rygoth doesn’t even know I’m helping you, and if she hasn’t hurt Safi by now, I’m sure that she’ll be fine. I’m not scared at all.”

Even through the water, Kara could hear the quiver in Bethany’s voice. She was a good witch, but a poor liar.
The stone farmhouse sat on a knoll overlooking several fields and a small pond. In the warmer seasons the view might be worthy of paintings, but for now all she could see was barren sameness in every direction. There were many things about Sentium that Kara enjoyed, but this frigid winter weather was not one of them. She missed earth, the smell of freshly grown flowers, chirping insects.

She missed Lucas.

It had been two months since she last saw him. She was certain that her father, now only pretending to be
Timoth Clen, would do his best to keep him from danger, but Kara had no way of knowing if either one of them were safe, and she worried constantly. The graycloaks were out of their league when it came to magic, and she couldn’t fight the feeling that she might never see Lucas again. Rubbing her hands vigorously by the hearth, Kara remembered how Lucas had almost kissed her at the Swoop station and felt a keen regret: *Why didn’t I lean forward and meet his lips when I had the chance?*

“Kara!” Taff called from upstairs. “Get up here!”

“Coming!”

She started up the stairs. For the most part, the farmhouse was comprised of features familiar to her: a wood-burning stove, four-poster beds, spheres half filled with water that required only a glorb to swirl them into illumination. Other elements of the house, however, baffled Kara and emphasized the fact that they were still strangers in this part of the world: ridged, metallic discs that adorned the walls like familial portraits; shelves filled
with cheaply made chapbooks written in an unintelligible language of dots and swirls; countless buttons, dials, and switches that seemed to serve no purpose whatsoever. (Which of course did not stop Taff from pushing/turning/flicking each and every one, repeatedly.)

Kara still didn’t know who owned the house; it had been empty when they found it, like so many other places. The world was in flux, and rumored sightings of the Spider Queen caused people to abandon their homes like animals fleeing a burning forest. On their journey here, Kara and Taff had traveled along roads packed with dusty emigrants, their wagons piled high with a lifetime of possessions.

*Why do they bother?* she wondered. *There’s nowhere safe to go.*

Ducking her head beneath the low doorway, she squeezed along a narrow staircase to the attic.

Though they slept in the downstairs bedrooms, where it was warmer, this was where the Westfall siblings spent
the majority of their time. A huge pane of glass set into the sloped ceiling kept the room well lit during daytime hours, and they had pushed the moldering crates against the walls, giving them the space they needed. With no usable paper to be found, they had covered the floor with charcoal drawings and any available wall space with lines of dense script.

Taff was kneeling on the floor, his back to her. He had found a blank space and was rapidly drawing something with a piece of charcoal worked down to a nub.

“Why were you gone for so long?” he asked.

Kara hesitated. She wanted to protect her brother, but she had also promised herself that she would never hide anything from him again, no matter how terrible.

Taff stopped drawing, sensing something wrong.

“What is it?” he asked.

She told him everything. When Taff learned that Rygoth had already acquired one-fourth of the *Vulkera*, he pounded his fist into his knee in frustration. The news
that Safi was in great danger hit him even harder, and Kara expected Taff to argue with the decision not to try and rescue his best friend immediately. He surprised her, however, immediately understanding the hard logic of making the grims their first priority.

*He’s getting older,* Kara thought.

“We need to focus on the spell,” he said, his voice trembling ever so slightly. “The quicker we stop Rygoth, the quicker we can save our friends.”

“Good plan,” Kara said, resisting the urge to wrap her arms around him; he was doing his best to act like an adult and needed to be treated accordingly. Instead, she peeked over Taff’s shoulder at his most recent sketch. “You’ve been hard at work. What are those things you—” She paused, noticing crumbs on her brother’s shirt, “Hey! Did you eat the last of the cake?”

Taff grinned impishly.

“I got hungry. And to be fair, it was my cake.”

Two days ago, Taff had celebrated his eighth birthday,
and Kara had managed to scrounge together the ingredients for a pumpkin cake with sweet-cream frosting, his favorite. She had also given him a battered pocket watch purchased from a peddler. Taff had taken it apart the next day and was still working out how to put it back together again.

“Don’t worry,” Taff said. “As soon as we get this spell to work, I’ll bake you a cake to celebrate.”

“Looking forward to it,” Kara said with more confidence than she felt.

She thought back on the conversation that had started it all. Father, no longer Timoth Clen but needing to continue the facade for their own safety, had come to free Kara and Taff from their imprisonment by the graycloaks. In their few precious minutes together, he told his children something useful he had learned while the ancient witch hunter inhabited his body.

“There’s a man name Querin Fyndrake,” Father said. “He’s old—older than Timoth Clen, even—and he
should be dead, but he’s not. ‘A heathen frozen in time, cowering in his Hourglass Tower’ was the way Timoth described him, whatever that means. I was going to—I mean, Timoth was going to mine this man for information. He knows where the four sections of the princess’s grimoire are located. Timoth was certain of it. Even so, he wasn’t in a huge hurry to talk to the man. The Clen showed no hesitation running headlong into battle with Rygoth, but this Querin Fyndrake frightened him.”

“Then he must be a good guy,” said Taff. “Right?”
Father clasped his son’s shoulder.
“I think it’s more complicated than that.”
“We need to talk to him,” Kara said. “If he can tell us where the grimoire pieces are, we can keep them away from Rygoth. Where do we find him?”
“That’s the hard part,” Father said. “See, the Hourglass Tower isn’t on any map, because its location is not a where. It’s a when. ‘The hour without a toll.’”
“That doesn’t make any sense,” Kara said.
Father shrugged his shoulders. “I wish I could tell you more, but I don’t even think that Timoth knew exactly what it meant.”

Taff turned to Kara, grinning madly.
“A riddle!” he exclaimed with glee.

During the next few weeks, they had considered all sorts of theories about the unusual phrase: *The hour without a toll*. Perhaps the “toll” was money that had to be paid in order to gain entrance to the tower. Or maybe Querin was living near a church whose bell was broken.

In the end, however, they had returned to Timoth’s description of the elusive man as “a heathen frozen in time.”

“A bell tolls every hour,” Taff said. “So if it never tolls, it means the hour never ends. Time has stopped. So all we have to do is freeze time and take a look around, see if we can find this Querin guy.”

“You make it sound as easy as a carriage stop on a long journey,” Kara said. “How do you propose we actually do such a thing?”
“When Rygoth needed an elixir to take away Sordyr’s powers, she created Niersook,” Taff replied, shrugging his shoulders. “All you need to do is create an animal that can stop time. Easy!”

At first Kara had balked at the idea, but then she remembered how Minoth Dravania, sitting beneath his tree in the Well of Witches, had playfully scolded her for still using the word “impossible.”

Is it crazier than anything else I’ve done? she thought.

“Remember when you created the Jabenhook to save my life?” Taff asked. “Just do that. Only instead of a big bird who heals people, make one that stops time.”

“Two problems,” Kara said. “That spell used a grimoire, which I don’t have . . .”

“Or need,” Taff said. “You’re wexari, remember?”

“. . . and the Jabenhook was easy to imagine into being because it was part of a story that I had been telling you for years.”

Taff, who had just recently learned how to snap his
fingers, relished the chance to do so now.

“That’s it!” he exclaimed. “We’ll just come up with a story so that our creature feels like it could really exist. And then you can build a mind-bridge to it and pull it into the real world.”

“You want me to build a mind-bridge to a figment of my imagination?” Kara asked.

Taff crossed his arms over his chest.

“Got any better ideas?”

Kara had not. Every night since then they had told their story, and Kara had tried to make a connection with their fictional creation. She hadn’t expected it to work right away, and in truth revising and improving the story—in an attempt to make the creature seem even more realistic—had been fun.

Five tries later, however, they seemed no closer to succeeding, and Kara was beginning to wonder if their plan had any possibility of working at all.

As usual, Taff did not share her doubts.
“Tonight’s the night,” he said, smudging a charcoal line with the tip of his finger. “It’s going to work. I can feel it.”

Kara pondered his latest rendering.

They had decided to use a real animal as a basis for their imaginary one—which they had been calling a yonstaff—thinking that it would be easier for Kara to picture it this way. After much debate they had compromised on a large dog with red fur and black spots. At first glance, Taff’s latest rendition of the yonstaff didn’t look much different from the dozens of other drawings that covered the floor, but upon closer inspection Kara saw that Taff had added meticulously detailed gears to the joints of the legs, giving the dog a half-mechanical appearance.

“What the change?” Kara asked.

Taff got to his feet. There were black patches on his knees and his forehead was smudged with charcoal.

“I think the spell hasn’t worked yet because the creature we’ve been trying to bring into the world doesn’t make any sense.”
Kara couldn’t help but smile at this.

“We’re trying to create an animal that can stop time, and you’re worried about it making sense?”

“Exactly,” Taff said. “The creature has to fit its purpose. Like, let’s say bears didn’t really exist, and you tried to imagine one, but without claws and fur. It wouldn’t really be a bear, would it?”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way,” Kara said. “But how long has it been since you slept?”

“All I’m saying is that our little guy needs to be more than just a funny-looking dog. It has to look like it can control time. I made some changes to the story, too,” he said, pointing toward the words scribbled across the opposite wall. “It’s not a question of magic. It’s a question of imagination. We can’t just say a creature called a yonstaff can control time and expect that to be enough. Your imagination has to be convinced that he actually exists. That’s the only way Topper will become real enough for you to build a—”
“Topper?” Kara asked.
Taff blushed. “I gave him a name.”
“He had a name, didn’t he? Yonstaff.”
“That’s just his species,” Taff said, “which was part of the problem. Instead of thinking of any old yonstaff you should be trying to imagine a specific one. It will be easier to build a mind-bridge that way. Naming something always makes it more real.”
“There’s sense in that,” Kara said, willing to give anything a try. Her previous attempts to cast the spell had been like cupping a handful of mist. “But Topper?”
“I combined time and stopper!” Taff exclaimed. “Get it?”
Kara laughed.
“Topper it is.”
She walked across the room to read Taff’s changes to the story. Grievous errors in spelling and grammar made Kara feel guilty that she had not stayed on top of his lessons, but overall the revisions were good ones. The story felt fuller now, as though the characters were not just
imaginary figments but living people dressed in words.

“This could work,” Kara admitted. “We’ll try it your way tonight. Maybe we could even—”

“Kara,” Taff said, his voice a strained gasp. “I think we have a problem here.”

She turned around. Grace Stone was standing behind her brother, a dagger to his throat.

“For once the little whelp’s right,” Grace said, smiling brightly. “You do have a problem.”
When Kara thought of Grace, she didn’t picture the red-robed Whisperer from the Well of Witches but Fen’de Stone’s daughter, the perfectly dressed angel who always wore a brightly colored ribbon in her hair and had found new ways to torment Kara each and every day.

That girl was gone.

Grace’s white hair had been shorn clean, leaving bristly stubble. Her clothes hung off her emaciated body like rags. Dirt streaked her face and encrusted her fingernails. Even her eyes had changed. They were the same stunning
shade of blue, but now they twitched from side to side with a mind of their own, as though looking for a way to escape their failing mistress altogether.

“Does it please you, seeing what I’ve become?” Grace asked. She leaned heavily on a wooden walking stick, keeping the weight off her bad leg. “I bet you always dreamed of this moment.”

“Don’t hurt him.”

“I’ve no interest in harming the whelp. I only want to talk.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all,” replied Grace, lifting the dagger from Taff’s throat. “But I can’t have you conjuring one of your little monsters and attacking me before I say my piece. There’s not much time, and I need your immediate attention if we’re all going to live through the night.”

Darno, having registered Kara’s need for help, slunk into the room. The wolf’s eyes remained fastened on Grace as he paced back and forth.
“Our new visitor does not make me feel very safe,” Grace said.

“Free my brother and no harm will come to you,” Kara replied. “I give you my word.”

“And what word is yours, Kara Westfall? Sunshine? Happiness? Butterflies? You are just so good, after all. How can I possibly doubt you?” Grace shoved Taff away. “Here, take him!”

Kara stepped in front of Taff protectively as Darno knocked Grace to the floor. The wolf pressed his teeth against the soft flesh of Grace’s neck and awaited further orders.

“No harm would come to me!” Grace exclaimed, her eyes wide with terror. “You promised!”

“And you threatened my brother’s life. I’m not the forgiving girl you knew back in De’Noran, Grace. Now tell me why you’re here, and maybe I can convince Darno not to tear your throat out.”

“As much as it might surprise you,” Grace said, “I’m
actually here to save your lives.”

Taff rubbed his neck.

“You have a strange way of showing it.”

“I needed to get your attention. Quickly. That’s all. Now get this thing off of me and stop wasting time.”

“Release her, Darno,” Kara said.

The wolf, with some reluctance, slid his teeth from Grace’s throat.

*Just a nibble?* he asked. *Hunting has been so scarce.* . . .

“I’m sorry, my friend.” Kara could feel the burning pangs of Darno’s hunger and felt guilty for teasing him with a meal. “But it’s not safe to dine on this one. There’s something inside her that’s rotten and foul.”

Rising to a sitting position, Grace took in the attic with a bemused expression: the drawings on the floor, the words scrawled across the walls.

“Have you two gone mad?” she asked brightly.

“Just say what you want to say,” Kara said.

“Fine,” replied Grace. “You trust me, right?”
“There aren’t enough nos in the world for me to answer that question.”

“You will, though. After tonight you’ll never doubt me again.” Grace brushed back hair that was no longer there. “It wasn’t wise to stay in the same spot for so long. The twins have learned of your location. They’ll be here any minute.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve been following you and I saw their approach.”

“Following me? Why?”

“You’re focused on the wrong part of the story. We need to leave right now, otherwise we’ll be trapped in this farmhouse.”

“Too late,” Taff said, looking out the window.

Kara joined him. Falling snow obscured her view, but she could still make out two figures sharing a grimoire. Behind them, at the bottom of the knoll, loomed an additional four witches. The twins were taking no chances.
“How do I know you didn’t lead them here?” Kara asked, turning on Grace. “This could be some sort of trick.”

“Then why would I warn you?”

Kara shrugged. “I don’t know. To gain our trust, maybe?”

“That doesn’t make any sense at all. I’m putting myself in danger just standing here talking to you. Why would I risk—”

“I’m sure you have your reasons,” Kara snapped. “You always do.”

“Things are different now,” Grace said in an overly calm voice. “I’m different.”

Kara scoffed.

“Maybe we should sort this out later,” Taff said, peering nervously through the window. “Where’s Rygoth? I don’t see her.”

“She’s not there,” said Grace, ushering them toward the door. “And why does it matter, anyway? Let’s just hop
on that flying caterpillar of yours and get out of here.”

Taff, hands on hips, spun to face Kara.

“Great idea!” he exclaimed. “Why don’t we do that?”

“Is there a problem?” Grace asked.

“I sent Rattle away,” Kara said. “She wasn’t exactly
inconspicuous, and I thought that after all that time
trapped in the Well of Witches she deserved her freedom.”

“Who said that was a terrible plan?” Taff asked, point-
ing to himself. “Who said we should keep Rattle close by
in case of an emergency?”

“Is now really the time?” Kara asked.

Outside, the black-cloaked witches had gathered in a
tightly knit circle, an eclipse of bodies against the snow.
They spoke words from their grimoires. Kara couldn’t
hear what they were saying, but she felt her muscles tense
in anticipation just before a flash of violet light illumi-
nated the nighttime sky. The entire house jerked upward,
as though a giant had torn it from its foundation and lifted
it into the air—and then dropped it. Attic windows
shattered. Beams split. Columns of crates fell over like catapult-struck towers, spilling their contents across the floor.

After helping Taff to his feet, Kara held up her arm against the snow now swirling into the attic and looked out the broken window. A wall of violet light enclosed the farmhouse and the approaching witches.

“What’s that?” Taff asked.

“Not sure,” Kara said, “but I have a guess.”

She quickly built a mind-bridge to a nearby pack of wolves and gave them an order: Flank the witches and attack them from behind. They were all too eager to comply, given the gnawing emptiness in their stomachs—but this bloodlust quickly changed to frustration as they crashed into the purple wall.

“It’s a magical barrier,” Kara said, her initial suspicion confirmed. “I’m cut off from the animals in the forest. They can’t help us.”

“What about the ones already inside the dome?” Taff asked.
Kara shrugged. “Sheep and chickens. And Shadow-dancer. Nothing that can do much harm.”


Kara nodded. “In the basement. I’ll send them. Maybe that will buy us a few minutes.”

Don’t forget about me, Darno said.

“No,” Kara started. “There’re too many of—”

But Darno was already out the door. Kara could have forced him to come back, but such a breach of trust would have ruined things between them.

Besides, Darno can take care of himself.

“We need to try the time-freezing spell again,” Taff said. “It’s our only chance.”

Kara shook her head.

“Too risky. There must be another way.”

“How about you surrender and tell everyone I captured you so they go easy on me?” Grace asked. “This way one of us lives.”

Kara and Taff ignored her.

“We can do this,” Taff said, grabbing Kara’s hands. “I’ll
tell the story. You do your witch thing. The spell will work this time. I can feel it.”

“But if it doesn’t—”

“It will!” Taff exclaimed. “Don’t you believe it?”

If Taff had asked her this question just a few months ago, Kara would have said no. But things were different now. She had braved the *queth’nondra* and regained her powers. She had faced Rygoth in battle and survived.

“Start reading the story,” she said.

“What *story*?” Grace asked. “What are you two babbling about?”

“I need to concentrate,” Kara said. “That means *you* need to hold the twins back for a few minutes. Think you can do that?”

Grace could barely restrain her laughter.

“Are you asking for my *help*?”

“If you want to survive,” Kara said, “I don’t see what choice you have. I’m sure Rygoth knows exactly who undid the curse on my father and helped her prisoner
escape. Do you really think she’ll let that go unpunished?”

“You haven’t noticed yet, have you?” Grace asked with an asymmetric tilt of her lips. “Then again, you never were the most observant sort.”

It took Kara another moment before she realized what was missing.

“Where’s your grimoire?” she asked.

Another flash of light shook the house. Two floors beneath them, something fell over with a giant thud. Grace nearly lost her balance, but Kara caught her before she fell.

“I tossed the evil thing to the bottom of an old well,” Grace said. “I’m done with magic. Done!” She sighed with displeasure. “I will, however, do what I can to make a barricade. See how helpful I am!”

Grace limped away, her staff tap-tap-tapping against the wooden floor, and began stacking crates against the attic door.

What was that all about? Kara wondered.
There was no time to think about it now; Taff was starting the story. Kara sat on the floor—trying to ignore the worrisome zigzags now splitting the boards—and kept her gaze focused on Taff’s most recent drawing of the yonstaff.

*Not just any yonstaff,* she corrected herself. *Topper. If it has a name it must be real.*

“Long before the remembrance of the oldest man on earth,” Taff said, reciting the words from the wall, “Time was still a fresh-faced babe that hadn’t yet learned to control its domain. Day and night fought for supremacy, hours would forget their order, and the minutes would sleep through their shifts. Needless to say, this caused all sorts of trouble for the humans, and so in order to help young Time until it mastered its duties, the gods created creatures called yonstaffs. They were hard workers who quickly settled the debate between day and night and taught the hours some good tricks to remember who came first. The real problem, however, was the minutes.
They were ridiculously lazy. Every day the yonstaffs had to nudge them all awake so they would be ready when their turn came. This was a lot of work, as you could imagine, and sometimes the yonstaffs fell behind and would have to stop the gears of time altogether while they caught up on their minute-waking duties. And this task of stopping time, when it arose, fell to the youngest yonstaff, whose name was Topper.”

Kara closed her eyes, translating Taff’s words to images. It wasn’t enough to hear the story. If the spell was going to work, she had to live it.

“Now yonstaffs,” Taff continued, “could not be seen by humans, of course—though those touched with magic might sense them as a warm breeze or a tingling at the ends of their fingertips—but the reverse was not true. Yonstaffs could see people just fine, and spent what little free time they had mocking the two-legs’ odd habits and routines. All except Topper. The little yonstaff found the creatures delightful, particularly a poor boy named
Ruzen. The son of a tanner, Ruzen was eight years old and not particularly handsome or smart. He laughed often and easily, however, and was kind to animals. Every evening Ruzen would gather the dogs of the village and play a game with a leather ball he had made with his own two hands. Topper would watch them for hours, basking in their carefree happiness like a turtle in the sun. More than anything else in the world, he longed to play with the boy, to catch the ball between his jaws and feel Ruzen’s hand pat the space between his ears. He wanted to hear the boy’s laugh, not muffled by the barrier between their worlds as all sounds were, but joyously close.”

As Taff talked, Kara tried to picture the individual elements of the story in as much detail as possible. The cowlick in Ruzen’s hair that would never stay down. The leather ball, slightly lopsided and with the stitches already falling out, the handiwork of a child who had not yet mastered his father’s craft. Most importantly, Kara focused the image of Topper in her head until it was as clear as a
recent memory. *His tongue lolls to the left when he’s out of breath. The pattern of dots on his chest looks like a constellation in the north sky. His breath smells like early morning dew.*

“Finally Topper’s longing grew so great that he went to the gods and begged them for permission to slip between the cracks of time and walk in the world of mortals. The gods were reluctant at first, but the faithful yonstaff’s longing was so great that eventually they agreed. They warned him, however, that he must keep his powers a secret, for the world was not yet ready for magic, and the consequences would be dire. Topper agreed. Within days he had found a place among the other dogs of the village, and days after that he had become Ruzen’s favorite. The yonstaff could not speak—for his magic was so powerful that even the slightest sound would release it—but it did not matter. The boy loved him, and this was all he needed.”

Something was happening outside. Snarls, raised voices, a yelp of pain. The wind grew into a cyclone that
tossed loose items around the room. Kara felt something made of glass strike her back and shatter. She ignored it and shut her eyes even tighter, driving the palms of her hands into her eyelids.

_The story. Stay focused on the story._

“One day,” Taff exclaimed, now shouting the words in order to be heard over the screaming wind, “Ruzen was climbing a tree, as he was wont to do, and at its highest point a branch broke and sent him falling through the air. Ignoring the gods’ advice, Topper made a single sound and time stopped just before Ruzen hit the ground. The moment the yonstaff touched Ruzen, the boy could see how everything in the world had paused in its motions, and though he was astonished at this turn of events, he loved Topper more than ever for saving his life. For a time, everything went back to the way it was. These were the happiest days of Topper’s life.”

Kara felt a new presence enter the world.

It wasn’t Topper yet—just a hazy jumble of thoughts
and ideas. She needed it to take a more concrete form before she could make it reality.

“Keep going, Taff!” Kara shouted.

“For a few years, Ruzen kept Topper’s talent a secret,” Taff said, talking faster. “However, as he grew older, his family’s poverty began to seem like an unfair anchor keeping him from the good things in life. Ruzen wanted to know what it was like to go to bed with a full stomach, to wear silk clothes that hadn’t been mended a dozen times. He saw in his pet’s ability a way to make his mark on the world. And so Ruzen, using skills that he had learned but never grown to love, crafted a man and woman from patches of leather and placed them in the center of the village. When a crowd had gathered, he announced that his poor creations were embarrassed to be out in the open without any clothes on and needed their help. The crowd laughed, sensing some kind of jest, and Ruzen nodded toward Topper. The yonstaff knew it was a mistake, but his love for the boy clouded his judgment and he could not
refuse. He made a sound. And while time was stopped, Ruzen went through the crowd and gathered various items—hats, gloves, boots, jewelry—and used these things to dress the leather man and woman. When time was set in motion again, it seemed to the audience that these items had flown to their new places in the blink of an eye. Their applause was ecstatic. They asked him to do the trick again. And again. Ruzen left a hat of his own near the feet of the leather man, and by the end of the day it was filled with coin.”

Kara could hear voices on the stairwell and pounding on the attic door. Focus. The story, the story, the story. Topper was so close. She could hear him, a faint whisper in her mind different from any animal she had ever heard. Kara constructed a mind-bridge from memories of companionship—Safi and Taff kicking their feet in the water, rolling dough with Aunt Abby—but no matter how many memories she added, the bridge never seemed to be long enough to span between the shores of reality and her imagination.
Come into my world, Topper, Kara thought. Let’s be friends, you and I.

Taff continued. Kara tried not to notice the fear in his voice as he competed with the pounding at the door.

“That night the boy, who was not really a boy anymore, slept with a full stomach, and in the morning he purchased three new sets of clothes. Topper hoped this would be the end of it. It wasn’t. For the next year, Ruzen and the yonstaff traveled through the local villages, doing their show. Soon Ruzen’s stomach hung over his belt and he had purchased so many sets of clothes that they needed a wagon just to cart them around. He shouted more. He laughed less. When Ruzen announced that they were going to the city where people had real coin, Topper knew it was a bad idea. He had noticed, in the past few villages, expressions of fear and revulsion mixed in with those of delight. Talk of Ruzen’s ‘trick’ had spread, but there were those who wondered if it was a trick at all and not some kind of dark magic. The city would be dangerous and
Topper, thinking only of the boy’s safety, tried to refuse. Ruzen locked him in a cage.”

Kara rose into the air.

She opened her eyes. The attic floor was far below her. Wooden rafters pressed against her head. The twins stared up at her in triumph, flakes of snow melting in their hair. Other witches had positioned themselves around the room. A hollow-cheeked crone grasped Taff’s face in two hands like an unloved aunt about to bestow a kiss. Grace lay on the floor, her eyes open but dazed. Blood ran freely from a gash in her head.

“We were so close to the end of the story,” Taff said, his fists clenched in frustration. “So close.”

The twins approached Kara in perfect unison, an open grimoire held between them. The remnants of the attic door crunched beneath their boots. They spoke in the guttural language that only they understood, and the words scratched at Kara’s earlobes like a woolen hat.

“Put my sister down!” Taff screamed, struggling
against the old witch restraining him.

The twins smiled and flipped to the next page in the spellbook. They spit out a stream of strange words, never speaking in unison, braiding the spell together seamlessly. The roof bucked and rattled like the cage of a feral beast.

“What’s happening?” Grace asked groggily as wooden shards and metal screws rained down around her. She turned toward the twins. “What are you doing?”

Kara felt the ceiling grow warm against her back and then vanish altogether as the top of the house shot high into the sky. Turning her head into the falling snow, she saw the roof hovering above her, flapping its bone-like rafters like a draconic marionette and peering down from a single, stalklike eye where its chimney used to stand. Despite her terror, Kara was awed by the grace of the newborn creature; it was as though the roof had been frozen in an inanimate form and was only now returning to its natural state. After trying to build a mind-bridge without success, Kara braced herself, certain that the
roof-dragon was going to swoop down and attack her, but instead it flew just beyond the house and shattered into a gust of splinters.

_The twins can’t create true life_, she thought. _Only destroy it._

With her ascent unimpeded, Kara rose out of the house.

She heard Taff screaming her name, but soon this was lost to the swirling storm. Kara twisted and turned, but like an untethered balloon, she could do nothing to halt her ascension. The house grew smaller beneath her. In the dim lamplight far below she saw the twins clap their hands in unison.

She fell.

Kara’s heart thundered in her chest as she plummeted through the sky. She kicked desperately, searching for a foothold that was nowhere to be found, and managed to twist her body around just in time to see the attic floor approach at sickening speed. Kara held her hands out in front of her . . . and jerked to a stop mere inches above the floor.
Gasping for breath, she turned her head to see the twins clapping their hands with glee and making short sputtering noises that sounded like giggles with all the joy clawed out.

“Stop it,” Taff pleaded with them, tears in his eyes. “Let her go.”

The twins raised their hands into the air.

Kara jerked upward, higher and faster than before. She used magic to call out to anything with wings, and droves of nearby birds flocked against the purple barrier enclosing the farmhouse, wanting to help but unable to reach her.

She fell. Rose again.

_They’re playing with me_, Kara thought, trying to calm herself. _That’s all. They won’t really hurt me. They can’t. Rygoth wants me alive._

When she fell again, however—her nose almost grazing the wooden floor this time—Kara saw the twins exchange a tiny, rebellious nod that seemed to indicate the culmination of some prearranged plan: _Yes, we have our_
orders, but we can’t allow this girl to live.

It didn’t matter that Rygoth wanted her alive. The twins, consumed by jealousy, were going to kill her anyway.

She rose slowly this time, as though the sisters wanted to draw this moment of triumph out as long as possible. Kara scanned the attic—searching for something, anything, that could help her—when she noticed a new arrival staring up at her: a medium-size dog with red fur and black dots. He had cogs instead of joints and was watching her with a look of pleasant expectation, as though she had a ball in her hand and was just waiting for the right moment to throw it. His tail, as it rocked back and forth in a steady rhythm, resembled the upside-down pendulum of a clock.

“Topper?” Kara asked.

The twins clapped their hands, and the magic holding Kara suspended in the air evaporated. She shot downward, faster this time, as though pulled by an invisible
cord. The twins crossed their arms, confirming what she had already suspected: this time, they would not be halting her descent.

“Topper!” Kara screamed. “Speak!”

The yonstaff reared back on his haunches and opened his mouth wide, releasing a sound that was nothing like a bark at all but rather like a giant bell tolling a forgotten hour.

The world stopped.
During the weeks that they had spent crafting Topper’s story, Kara and Taff had engaged in many debates about what might happen if time actually stopped. Taff, who believed that magic had its limitations, thought that nature would go about her business as usual: the wind would blow, snow would continue to fall. Only people, and perhaps animals, would stand as still as statues. Kara, on the other hand, believed that everything would freeze in place like a painting, with only those who had cast the spell retaining their ability to move.
They were both wrong.

Looking around the attic from where she hovered several yards in the air, Kara saw that the current moment was not completely frozen but caught in a kind of net that permitted the slightest of movements but no escape. A fly dangled in midair, but its wings kept twitching. A snowflake vibrated like a recently struck tuning fork. Taff’s body was frozen, but the lips of his wide-open mouth trembled in a silent scream. The air itself thrummed with sounds looped over and over again, becoming indistinguishable from one another as they merged into a high, insect-like drone.

Panting gently, Topper watched Kara with his head canted to one side. His pendulum tail, perhaps a register of time’s movement, had stopped ticking back and forth.

“Good boy,” Kara said.

Topper’s chest puffed up with pride. Kara heard a whisper in her mind, as though the yonstaff were trying to communicate with her, but she couldn’t make out
the words. The mind-bridge had been strong enough to bring Topper into the world, but there was, in this way, an unspannable distance between them.

“Now how do I get out of here?” she mumbled to herself.

Kara kicked her feet and swung her arms, trying to swim through the air, but although she was able to turn her body all the way around, she could not get any closer to the ground.

Topper watched her struggle, a look of amusement on his canine face.

Thinking that this invisible tether might break if enough force were applied, Kara grabbed onto a column that had once supported the attic roof, drew herself close—and then pushed away with all her strength. She spun through the air and jerked to a sudden stop like a dog at the end of its leash. After repeating this a few more times, Kara found that she was able to travel a farther distance, as though the magic holding her in place was
beginning to fray. Finally, on her sixth attempt, something snapped and Kara crashed to the wooden floor with a bone-rattling thud.

She rolled over on her back, cradling her left elbow, and found herself staring straight into Topper’s muddy eyes.

“Hello,” Kara said.

The yonstaff watched her, eager to see what the amusing human would do next.

Taff, she thought.

He had been frozen in the midst of a long stride, having managed, just before time stopped, to finally escape the old crone holding him in her grasp. His captor was reaching out for him, deep scratches and several bite marks lining her veined arms.

“Taff,” Kara said, shaking him by the shoulders. “Wake up!”

But Taff’s expression remained frozen in the same unsettling midscream—until Topper licked his hand.
Instantly, his eyes opened and he tumbled to the floor. “Ow,” he said, sitting up quickly and rubbing the back of his head. “What the heck?”


Kara saw the pendulum tail tremble, as though Topper was struggling against some implacable force to wag it. The tail can’t move again until time does. This had not been part of the story they created, but as Kara had learned when she conjured the Jabenhook, small details often changed during the magical transition from imagination to reality.

Taff rose to his feet, taking in his surroundings. “This is amazing!” he exclaimed. Given his enthusiastic gesticulations, Kara suspected that Taff might have
shouted the words, but his voice was strangely muffled in this suspended world, as though he were speaking through a closed door. “I mean, you’ve done some pretty incredible things before, but you actually stopped time!” He stood eye to eye with one of the twins, her face hardened into a permanent scowl. “Do you think she can see me?” he asked.

“I doubt it.”

Taff stuck out his tongue anyway.

“Don’t play with the frozen people,” Kara said. “And it wasn’t just me who did this. We created the spell together.”

“I guess.” Taff shrugged. “But it would have just been a story without your magic. I didn’t really do anything at all.”

It wasn’t the first time that Taff had put himself down like this. Despite her brother’s invaluable help, he never felt like he did enough.

*I’ll talk to him about it later*, she thought. *Who knows how*
long this spell is going to last. When Kara built a mind-bridge it was usually a permanent fixture that she could return to time and time again, but the one linking Topper and herself felt as insubstantial as a half-remembered dream. At any moment it might dissipate altogether, allowing time to continue its forward march.

“Let’s go,” Kara said, spinning around and nearly colliding with an auburn-haired witch whose nose twitched slightly, as though she had been frozen just before a sneeze. Kara stepped around her and navigated past the other figures spaced throughout the attic floor. Topper padded softly behind her. “Hopefully we can get past the barrier,” she said, thinking out loud. “And we have to wake up Darno and Shadowdancer. And retrieve our supplies, too. We won’t get far without—”

“Kara? Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Taff stood over Grace. Her eyes were closed. It was the first time that Kara had ever seen her look truly at peace.
“We can’t just leave her here,” Taff said. “They’ll kill her as soon as time starts again.”

“What happens to Grace is not our problem.”

“But it kind of is,” said Taff. “Listen, no one hates Grace more than me—”

Kara stared at him with arms akimbo: Really?

“Okay, almost no one. But she really has helped us! She restored Father, just like she said she would, and if Grace hadn’t warned us that the twins were coming you never would have had enough time to cast the spell.”

“So . . . what then?” Kara asked. “We just bring her with us? You don’t honestly think we can trust her, do you?”

Taff shook his head.

“We bring her somewhere safe,” he said. “And then we part ways.”

Kara exhaled through her teeth. If she left Grace here, it would be the same as murdering her outright. On the other hand, traveling with Grace, even temporarily,
created a whole new set of unnecessary risks.

*It’s never easy, is it?* she thought.

“Besides,” Taff continued, “you heard what she said. She doesn’t even use magic anymore. How dangerous can she be?”

After Kara was done laughing at *that* one, she called Topper over and held Grace’s cold hand to his mouth. He licked her palm. Grace jerked suddenly awake as though woken from a nightmare.

Her first response was to wipe her hand on her shirt.

“Eww,” she said, pushing Topper away. “Where did this ugly dog come from?” Then she noticed the change in their surroundings and her blue eyes widened with wonder. She turned to Kara, her mouth agape. “*You* did this?”

Kara shrugged. “Mostly it was Topper.”

“Right,” Grace said, giving the yonstaff a wry look. “Topper. How long will time stay frozen like this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then let’s make use of it while we can.”
Reaching down, she removed a dagger from a sheath inside her boot and approached the nearest twin.

“What are you doing?” Kara asked.

“What needs to be done,” Grace said, raising the dagger into the air.

Kara grabbed her wrist.

“You can’t kill them,” Kara said.

“Why not?”

“They’re defenseless.”

“Which is, literally, the best time to kill them. Haven’t you learned *anything*? They’ll keep coming for you if you don’t stop them now. This makes sense and you know it.”

“No killing,” Kara said.

“Do you think these witches would show us any mercy if the situations were reversed?”

“Of course not. But that’s what makes us different. So you have to ask yourself, Grace—what kind of witch are you? Are you more like them—or me?”

Grace turned from Kara to the twins, from the twins
to Kara. She sighed despondently.

“Are those really the only two choices?” she asked.

“You helped us,” Taff said. “You wouldn’t have done that unless there was good in you. Somewhere deep.” He considered his own words. “Really, really, really deep.”

With a groan of exasperation, Grace slid the dagger into her sheath.

“Being good isn’t very practical, is it?” she asked.

They found Darno just outside the farmhouse. His jaws were locked in a fearsome snarl as he faced down a trio of witches. From the fingertip of the center witch sparked a bolt of black lightening frozen in midair. Topper awoke the wolf, and Darno—thinking he was still in the midst of battle—snapped fiercely at the unsuspecting yonstaff before Kara calmed him.

“It’s okay,” she said, holding his head in place so she could look directly into his eyes. “I’ve got you. You’re safe.”
A patch of blood matted his fur. After checking for a wound, Kara was relieved to see that the blood wasn’t his own, though a scorch mark had burned through to the skin of his left flank. The hook-shaped stinger at the end of his scorpion tail was still wet from recent use.

Kara saw several witches lying motionless in the snow. When time was restored, Kara had the feeling that they would still be motionless.

“Thank you for protecting me,” Kara said.

Darno stared at her strangely as he licked a minor wound on his paw.

_Why thank you? Wind blows. Sun rises. Thank them too?_

“It’s different,” Kara said. “You could have run, but you risked your life for me.”

_Not different. Sun gives light and heat. I protect Witch Girl. All we are._

Ignoring Grace’s snide comment to Taff—“Does she always talk to herself like that?”—Kara crossed the front yard. Snowflakes slid off her body and then returned to
their original position after she passed, like a curtained doorway. Kara paused before the barrier surrounding the farmhouse, which was even more imposing up close: a purple, semitranslucent wall that seemed to touch the stars. It provided surprisingly little hindrance, however, stretching like taffy as they passed through it and then snapping back into place. They gathered Shadowdancer from the stable and set off down the main road, Kara and Grace on the mare, Taff riding Darno’s back.

“What happened to your hair?” Taff asked Grace.

“Lice,” she said, running a hand over the stubble. “Had to shear it off. What happened to your nose?”

Taff, with a suddenly self-conscious expression, felt his face.

“Nothing!”

“My mistake,” said Grace. “So what’s the plan here? Keep walking until we collapse of exhaustion?”

Taff beamed, eager to share: “There’s a man who’s frozen in time and we’re going to ask him about—”

“You don’t need to know our plan,” Kara interjected,
placing a hand on her brother’s back. “Once time starts again we’ll go our separate ways.”

“We could do that,” Grace said. “The Clen knows I’ve little desire to remain in your company. But I’m not convinced that’s the wisest decision.”

“And why’s that?” Kara asked.

“Because we could help each other,” Grace said.

“We don’t need your help.”

“And yet you’ve already taken it. Twice. I reversed the curse on your father, just like I promised I would. And then there’s tonight.”

“That hardly balances the scales between us, Grace.”

“I know that, Kara. I can’t undo the things I’ve done. It’s just”—and here her voice softened to an uncertain whisper—“the World is a strange and unsettling place. There are so many things here that I don’t understand. And it’s so huge. It feels as though I could walk forever and never reach its end.”

Kara felt an unwelcome sense of empathy for the frail-looking girl before her. Despite their differences, the two
were tied together by a common birthplace, which meant that Kara understood Grace’s feelings perfectly.

“People here don’t call it the World,” Kara mumbled softly. “They call it Sentium.”

“Sentium?” Grace asked.

“It was strange to us at first too,” Taff added. “You get used to it.”

“I miss De’Noran,” Grace said. “Things were simpler there.”

“Because you were Fen’de Stone’s daughter and could do whatever you pleased,” muttered Kara.

“Well, yes,” said Grace, as though this were obvious. “But it’s more than that. De’Noran is my home.” She crossed her arms and raised her chin, looking for just a moment like her old self. “I will return there one day. Now that Timoth Clen has left, the people of De’Noran will be ecstatic to see their rightful leader return.”

Kara shook her head in disbelief. *Doesn’t Grace remember how she terrorized the entire village? They’ll never forgive her! But, of course, Grace would never think about things*
from that perspective. She was incapable of considering anyone else’s feelings but her own.

“I have bad news for you,” Kara snapped. “Timoth Clen destroyed your precious village before he left the island. There isn’t any more De’Noran to go back to.”

Grace didn’t say anything. When Kara glanced back over her shoulder, the girl’s eyes were shiny with tears.

“I guess you two are all I have left then,” she said with a sad smile. “Isn’t life strange?”

Taff’s face softened and he started to say something comforting, but Kara glared at him and shook her head: Don’t you dare! Back on De’Noran, Grace had consistently invoked the villagers’ compassion through downtrodden expressions and pitiable sighs. It was how she had hidden her true nature, and Kara was not about to fall for those old tricks.

She’s up to something, Kara thought. The quicker we get rid of her the better.

And yet she couldn’t help but notice how small and broken the girl looked.
What if she really is trying to change? What kind of person would I be if I just abandoned her?

Don’t be a fool! The minute you trust her is the minute she betrays you.

“What’s that?” Taff asked.

Kara squinted her eyes, trying to make out the shape in the darkness, but all she could see was a dark blur. Whatever it was, it looked tall.

“I think it’s a tower,” said Grace. “Strange-looking, too. Like an hourglass.”

Kara and Taff exchanged a knowing glance.

“We traveled along this road when we came to the farmhouse,” Kara said. “I don’t recall passing any tower, strange-looking or otherwise.”

“Because it only appears when time stops,” Taff said, beaming. “‘A heathen frozen in time.’ It has to be him!”

“Him who?” asked Grace.

Ignoring her question, Kara spurred Shadowdancer onward.