

Sisters

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Leinore found the dead snake mixed in the ashes of a campfire gone cold hours ago. It was a small thing, charred through and sooty, but it had somehow kept its shape. Leinore reached out her hand and picked it up.



Leinore, Autumn Sovereign | Art by: Fariba Khamseh

“Eww “ Sinnia said, the snout of her fox mask bobbing as she spoke. “Put it down.”

Then, as if Leinore’s touch had animated the creature, it wriggled its body and flicked its forked tongue. Leinore tossed it away with a scream. It landed back in the pit of ashes, still as anything—almost like it had never moved at all.

“Not so brave now,” her sister laughed.

Her little sister always teased her with kindness. Leinore couldn’t manage a smile, though. Not after the news of another missing family this morning. The ancient festival of Harvesttide, now revived, was supposed to bring hope to the people and restore the balance between light and darkness.

That’s what the witches of the Dawnhart Coven promised her and the people of Kessig. “Help us bring back the light,” they had said to the villagers. Even though they wore skulls on their heads and mud on their faces and looked as menacing as the monsters hiding in the woods, people agreed to help them. “Bring back the light,” people whispered all around. Soon, it was more than a whisper. It was a promise and a prayer.

But more people turned up missing every morning, and the days seemed dimmer than ever.

Leinore didn't usually need cheering up. She would be the first one to get up in the morning, to prepare breakfast for her sister and her father before he left for the fields. Afterward, she would make the rounds through their small village, visiting elders who lived alone, or children whose families had been blighted by some catastrophe, supernatural or not, and share whatever baked goods she had made that day. It gave her peace to know people were happy, or at least content; a sense of order.

That order had been disturbed ever since The Travails. Now, the nights grew longer, and the days were cut too short. The winter frost came months earlier than it should have, draping Kessig like a thin veil.

Katilda, the leader of the coven, promised she could fix the imbalance if the festival was a successful one, and Leinore wanted nothing more. When the Dawnhart Coven asked her to oversee the festivities, she knew what the witches expected from her: to do what she had always been doing. She would keep the people fed, the decorations bright and the atmosphere festive. A simple job that was getting more and more difficult.

Leinore examined the empty tent in front of her. A woodsman and his family had found lodging inside for as long as the festival lasted. There were quite a few of those around, scattered in the clearings around the Celestus, sheltering travelers who arrived from all over Kessig. The creeping cold became unbearable in the late hours, even though it was only autumn.

With the blessings and charms of the hedge witches all around them, people had felt safe at first. The bravest of them slept out in the open with only the dark sky for a roof and their thick furs for covers. The moon loomed bigger and closer than ever, but the festivalgoers were less afraid of the dangers that lurked in the dark when the charms of the Dawnhart Coven were protecting them. Or at least, they had been. "Perhaps they left," Leinore mumbled. "They got tired of the cold, packed their stuff, and went home."

Sinnia shivered, though Leinore didn't think it was from the miserable weather. Her fox costume was covered in bright red maple leaves. Leinore thought she looked more like a rare and strange bird, ready to take flight.

"Their stuff is still here." Sinnia pointed at a small cloth bundle next to a shack, easy to miss under the frost and the leaves that had fallen during the night. "Besides, who would travel in the dark? I don't like this. Let's go home. They might turn up by tomorrow."

She was right, of course. This was the second family this week. Another tent left intact. Nobody could be in such a hurry that they would leave their things behind—or worse, travel through the Kessig forests during the night.

There was something else lying next to the bundle. It looked small and sinuous.

"I really hope that's not another snake." Leinore squinted. The mists were getting thicker as night approached.

Sinnia walked over the bundle and kicked around some of the frost and leaves.

"Oh, that's pretty!" Sinnia picked it up. It was a festival mask, but not like the ones the townsfolk wore at the Harvesttide. It looked more like a hedge witch's headdress, elaborate and off-putting. But that didn't make sense. The lost family was just a woodsman and his wife.

The scale-crusted mask was a deep gold. Sticks were fixed on top of it like most of the witches' headdresses, only instead of sunrays or moonbeams, they looked more like snakes coiling out from the plaster. Under the eyes of the mask, two long, wooden fangs stuck out.

“Put that down,” Leinore said. Sinnia gave her a look, but it just didn’t feel right to take things that weren’t theirs. Even if the people had—

Something wasn’t right. Leinore turned to her sister and said, “You know, we should get out of here while we still can. Go home.”

Sinnia took off her fox mask and tried on the new one, causing Leinore to flinch.

“We don’t know what happened to them,” Leinore said slowly. “And father is always suspicious of everything since—”

She stopped. There was no point in bringing mother up. When the Cursemute—the spell that had cured so many werewolves—had broken, the creatures’ bloodlust and animal instincts had carried them all off, including their mother. A small blessing: she never hurt anyone that they knew of, only returned to the woods. This made it easier for them to claim she had been killed by a bear, even if the villagers only pretended to believe this out of pity.

Sinnia shook her head. “You just don’t want people to spoil your celebrations.”

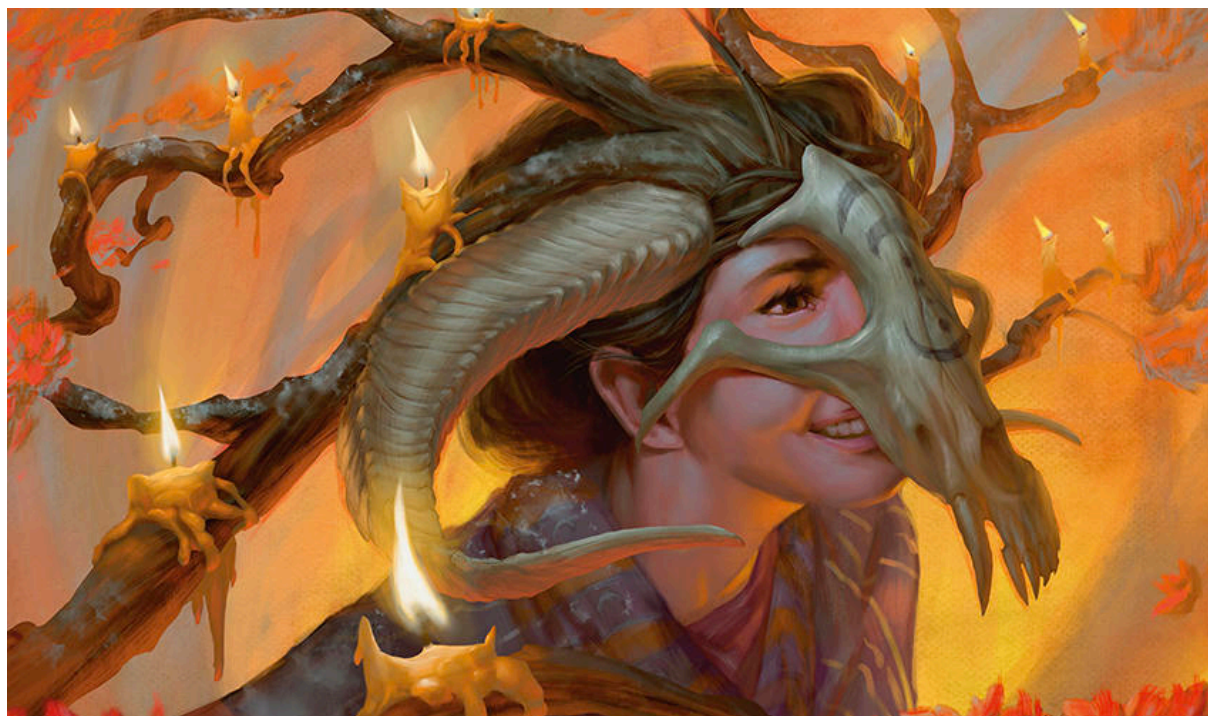
Leinore’s face grew hot. “Please take off that mask.”

But Sinnia ignored her. She tied the mask’s ribbons tight over her black curls and did a small twirl. “I am pretty sure they won’t be coming back to ask for it.”

Leinore hated the mask. And it wasn’t just the fact that Sinnia took it without permission. It made her uncomfortable. She didn’t want to look at it straight in the eyes. *Its eyes. Her eyes.* She shook off the strange thought. It was unnerving, that was all. No different than the witches’ rituals.

“Let me talk to Katilda,” Leinore softened her voice. Her sister could be headstrong sometimes but ultimately, she would listen to her. “Perhaps she can help. And *please* take off that mask?”

“Fine.” Sinnia took off the mask and donned the fox one again. She had made it, along with Leinore’s deer mask, and was proud of both. “But I’ll keep it until they come back.”



Hedgewitch’s Mask | Art by: Ovidio Cartagena

She didn't believe Katilda and the coven had something to do with the missing people. There was something about the kind look in her eyes Leinore trusted. So what if they were strange? The witches had been hermits for so long it was natural to be cryptic about their rituals. Perhaps they didn't want their magic to fall into the wrong hands. And considering their power, Leinore didn't blame them. She had seen them split trees in half with a gesture or conjure water from the earth for thirsty festivalgoers.

But another thought crept about her mind. What if the rest of the coven was not as harmless as Katilda? Was the witch really in control of what was happening?

The thing slithered at the edges of her vision again, but this time it was only in her memory. There was something in the mists last night. Even now she could feel its oppressive presence all around. It felt like it was both gliding overhead—hidden somewhere in the thick canopy—and shifting under her feet, cloaking itself with dead leaves and frost. Leinore shivered and tried to tell herself it was nothing. Tomorrow, another festival day would start, and she would need to be its bright and happy face once again.

In a city, all the roads lead to a church. Or so Leinore had heard people say. People who had traveled to places such as Thraben and seen buildings bigger than all the houses in Kessig put together.

In the Ulvenwald, all the roads led to the Celestus. The structure's golden glow pierced through branches and foliage. Its metallic rings reached the canopy overhead and even higher still. Leinore could see the glow when she was lying in her tent at night.

Around the machine, the people had set up tents and stalls for all sorts of trade. Not even the cold could stop a healthy appetite for coin. Blessed weapons were exchanged for precious family heirlooms, fur for leather, potions for magic scrolls that would keep their readers safe, or so the traders promised. If Leinore hadn't known better, she might have even believed their promises. She had seen real magic in the hands of the witches, though, and this felt nothing like it.

The people who felt unsafe sleeping in the forest had moved closer to the Celestus since last night, setting up their tents among the rest, huddling together like rabbits. The lights and the crowd must have made them feel protected. There was still laughter and music in the air, but now there was something wilder in the mix, too. Everything felt numb and dampened, and the hoarfrost sat on their shoulders like a couple of icy hands.

Leinore did her best to greet everyone she recognized despite the masks and welcome those she didn't, giving away branches of living wood for good luck. Sinnia was a few steps behind her, mimicking her sister and smiling, even though Leinore could hear her dragging her feet.

At the center of the Celestus, on top of the dais, Katilda and her coven were doing another one of their rituals. They had started simple enough, with plenty of food and beer and bright candles. There was dancing and singing that sounded more like howls, but the townsfolk did not seem to mind. Many of them, including Leinore, felt like howling themselves.

But after the first couple of days, their rituals became stranger and stranger. Beastly shapes seemed to dance inside the bonfires along with the witches. When the women opened their mouths to utter invocations, Leinore could see clumps of black dirt clinging to their teeth and staining their tongues. Ghrin-Danu's kiss, they called it.

Katilda's costume was getting more extravagant with each passing day, too. Today, along with the grassy shoulder pads and the massive headpiece meant to mirror the glory of the sun, she carried a mesh necklace made with ribbons and some sort of animal teeth. Two crimson lines were drawn under her eyes, like tears of blood.

Leinore widened her stride, leaving Sinnia behind.



Dawnhart Rejuvenator | Art by: Darren Tan

Teeth were gathered in a heap in the middle of the coven's circle on the dais. When Leinore drew nearer to the dais, the teeth didn't look like they belonged to an animal at all.

They were very much human.

Leinore felt her stomach stir. The witches, mumbling a low chant under their breath, were binding the teeth in necklaces like charms and handing them out to the people. Some hesitated, looking at each other with plain disgust. Others grabbed the necklaces and shoved them hastily in their pockets or spat at the witches' feet and turned away.

"What is this?" Leinore managed to say.

Katilda turned up from her work. Surprise written on her face.

"They are teeth," she said plainly. "Werewolf teeth."

"They don't look like werewolf teeth." Leinore felt all the eyes on her. She glanced at the crowd, looking for Sinnia, but could not find her.

"Well," Katilda waved her arms around, slightly offended. "They shifted back into human form after death. But they still have the essence of the wolf."

Leinore tried not to think of her mother. Instead, her thoughts went to her sister, her father back in the village, the people gathered close to the dais. She was supposed to bring hope and light to the villagers and yet here she was, feeling all the light she had leaving her body.

Say something, she said to herself. *Anything*. But what could she say?

"Witch."

Leinore recognized the man by his volume alone. Jagger had always been the noisiest trapper in their village—not a good quality, for a trapper. He fancied himself important, a leader of everyone who had assembled here, regardless of how many people agreed with him. With each step he seemed to rattle.

The noise was coming from the countless charms he had on him. Already a tall man, he had arrayed oxen teeth, runes, and blessed silver—or so he claimed—on top of his fur coat, to make him stand out from the crowd. A loud, angry man. He would only make things worse.

“Did you steal those from the missing villagers?”

Leinore’s stomach clenched. A couple of days ago, she would have defended the witches without a shred of a doubt. But no matter how much she wanted to roll her eyes at Jagger, she wasn’t sure he was wrong. Not completely.

“Missing?” another witch asked as if the news had not reached everyone.

“We are not your enemies,” Katilda stepped down from the dais to face Jagger. “Harvesttide cannot succeed with witches alone. We must do this together.”

“I don’t trust someone who tells me nothing,” spat Jagger. “You brought us here, asking us to help you. But you keep us in the dark.”

“Don’t trust the witches! Tell us where the missing are!” The voices were coming from all over. They demanded answers. Leinore could see the villagers growing increasingly restless, ready to burst with anger. They had come here for salvation, but they had only found the same darkness you could find in any corner of Innistrad.

“Wait a minute!” Leinore shouted at Jagger. “They didn’t do anything. You have no proof.”

Jagger sneered gesturing at the teeth. “Isn’t this proof enough?” He was making a show of it now. “What’s next? They feed us the flesh of the dead?”

“They are here to help us,” Leinore made a pathetic effort. Her mind was elsewhere now. Where was Sinnia?

“By sacrificing people!” Jagger moved toward Katilda. He towered over her despite her imposing headpiece. He could easily brush her aside with a sweep of his arm. Leinore could feel the witch and the rest of the coven preparing for a fight.

“Nobody is sacrificing people,” Sinnia said. Her voice came from somewhere close.

Leinore looked around but couldn’t find her. Couldn’t trace the fox mask among the rest of the autumn-colored masks. She was certain, though, that this was her sister’s voice.

In the crowd, Leinore made out Sinnia’s dress with the red and orange leaves. Her long curly hair swayed left and right as Leinore’s sister walked toward her. Those at least had stayed the same—her fox mask wasn’t there anymore. In its place, Sinnia wore the new mask.

“You speak as if the woods have not been full of dangers ever since we were born,” Sinnia said while climbing up the dais.

Everyone stopped, even Jagger and Katilda. As if someone put them under a spell, their anger died down as fast as it had erupted.

“Anything could have taken them. So many hungry things lurk in the dark. Vengeful spirits, vampires, ghouls, werewolves.”

There were voices of agreement in the crowd, now. Everyone looked at the pile of teeth as if they were seeing them for the first time. Their eyes were glassy, but they were listening to what Sinnia had to say as if she were the only one who mattered now. Leinore was staring at her sister in disbelief. Her stomach twisted from a sudden dread she could not explain.

"If anything, their demise should humble us. We can't do anything while the darkness grows. Bring back the light." Sinnia gestured at the floating candles, and they seemed to burn brighter, a new spark born inside them.

"Bring back the light!" People shouted.

Some of the people clapped. Music rose from somewhere in the back of the crowd. Jagger opened his mouth to speak but nobody was paying attention to him anymore. Neither to Katilda nor the coven. The villagers were circling Sinnia, touching her hands with adoration, gently pulling her to their company, their music, their dances.

Everyone was happy and hopeful, just like it had been on the first day. Even the cold seemed less bitter now.

So why was Leinore shivering with fear?

When they returned to their tent that night, Sinnia brought a fur that a trapper had gifted her and threw it at Leinore. She was still wearing the mask.

"Get warm," she said. "It's going to be a long few days."

Leinore didn't stir from her corner of the bedding. Every time the mask looked at her, she felt another presence in the tent with them. *Not the mask*, she told herself. *Sinnia. Every time Sinnia looks at me.*

"I thought you said we should leave," Leinore mumbled.

Sinnia took off her costume. Pieces of dried leaves fell to the ground, like a snake shedding its skin. She left her mask on. She crouched on the floor a few inches from Leinore's face. Her breath smelled of dead things, ashes, and rust. "I don't want to leave anymore. The Coiled One has spoken to me today, sister." Her voice came out deeper, raspier. Like coming from somewhere else. Someone else. When she smiled, Leinore thought she saw a forked tongue peek out of the slit between her teeth. "The light will return to Innistrad."

The oppressiveness of what Leinore felt last night returned, only this time worse.

"You feel it too?" asked Sinnia, almost too delighted to contain herself. "The Coiled One is surfacing."

The air was squeezed out of Leinore's chest by an unfolding presence inside the tent. It made her mind foggy. The leaves faintly rustled in the trees as if something was hiding, right above their heads. When she looked at Sinnia again she was lying still on her bedroll, mask still in place. Not sleeping, Leinore was sure. More like pretending to be asleep.

It had been two nights since they found that mask. For the tenth time that night, Leinore ground a snake under her boot. It was small as a human finger, brown, and covered in bile, like the ones before. It stirred a little bit under her shoe, just enough to make her cringe, and then was still. She should have been used to them by now but wasn't. These were no ordinary snakes.

Somehow over the last few days, Sinnia had replaced Leinore as the Sovereign of Harvesttide in the eyes of the festivalgoers. She basked in the attention as they looked to her to light the first lantern of the night, to raise a toast to the noonday sun. Not only was she more confident than before, but she had a strange effect on people. Wearing that mask made people listen to her in a way they didn't listen to Leinore or even Katilda. If Leinore had not known her sister, she would swear she was one of the witches, and a very powerful one at that.

The changes to Sinnia's personality, unnatural though they may have been, were nothing compared to what she could do to people now. The first time Leinore had watched it, she had been horrified: she would touch someone on the brow, whisper something under her breath, and the villager would begin to choke. Their eyes would roll back into their head until they coughed out a small, squirming serpent. It was nightmarish—and yet the others seemed to rejoice as if every new snake was cause for celebration.



Celebrate the Harvest | Art by: Eelis Kytanen

The screams, “Bring back the light!” rose from the crowd. The people's faces were contorted by such wild joy that Leinore found the villagers more terrifying than any werewolf. They could not tell what was natural and what was cursed anymore, and Leinore was unsure she could either.

Leinore used every power an older sister had over a younger one to make things right again. She yelled at her, threatened to tell their father, tried to grab Sinnia and drag her back to their tent. But of course, the villagers would come between them every time. A wave of bodies crashing against hers and circling her sister's. Begging Sinnia for more miracles, more snakes. More light. To them, she was more than the Sovereign now; she was their savior. Nobody seemed too concerned this time with the group of goatherds that went missing during the night. If Sinnia told them it was alright, then it was.

Leinore needed her sister more than ever, but the Sinnia she knew was gone. The last glance Leinore stole of her that night was when Katilda offered her a headpiece from their coven in exchange for her mask. The headpiece had deer antlers instead of sinuous sticks and was painted with blood mixed with mud and leaves. Leinore was not close enough, so she could not hear what the two women said to each other. But Sinnia laughed in Katilda's face and turned away.

Leinore returned to their tent first, hid under the furs, and waited. Sinnia was up to something. Every night after she found that mask, she would leave their bed and come back only when the first weak light peered inside the tent. Not long after, she heard frozen leaves crunching under someone's footsteps. She could tell it was Sinnia by the way the atmosphere shifted, squeezing the air out of her lungs. She curled up into a tight ball and tried her best to disappear under the covers.

When Sinnia entered the tent, she went straight for their bed. Leinore had her eyes shut but she felt her sister's scrutinizing gaze on her. She kept her breath even and her face relaxed, praying that her heartbeat wouldn't betray her. It was only a few agonizing moments, but they felt like hours. When Sinnia was certain Leinore was fast asleep, she left the tent. Then she slowly slid from beneath the furs and got up, still dressed.

Leinore followed Sinnia into the night. The only thing Leinore left behind was her mask.

Tracking her sister's steps was harder than she thought. Perhaps she had waited too long for Sinnia to disappear behind the tall trees, and now her chance was gone. Leinore shuffled around the frozen undergrowth for a while, her only light coming from the distant, fading glow of the Celestus on the horizon, the candles, and the occasional lantern.

Then she heard the crawling again. Whatever it was, it was materializing. It was more than a feeling. So tangible she could now hear it. It sounded far away, but there was no denying it was the same thing she was hearing for days now, and it was coming from the northwest, toward the heart of the forest. Leinore licked her dry lips and followed the noise.

Not too long after she came out into a small camp made up of five tents, a sign that mostly loners must have been camping there. Before she even got close, she heard someone making a gurgling sound, as if their head was plunged underwater. Panic fought against any desire to help; she ducked behind a tent as two figures emerged in the distance. One she was sure belonged to her sister, Sinnia. The mask betrayed her even in the dark. But the way the two shapes stood did not make sense. It looked like Sinnia held a man by the throat as easily as if he was a dead raccoon. She was dragging him over leaves and hoarfrost, away from the small camping site and deeper into the heart of the woods.

She followed the figures to a strange clearing covered by a thick canopy of branches. Leinore stopped in her tracks as her sister kept dragging the body of this man toward an oval rock at the edge of the clearing.

No, not a rock. An egg.

It was at least as big as the man she carried and sat next to a line of many others. They were pale green and iridescent, glowing in the dark like little balls of light. Sinnia touched the egg and it gave way to her touch, opening like a leathery flower. To Leinore's horror, she watched her sister push the unconscious man into it. The egg closed around him, enveloping him like a womb.

Leinore tried to move, but her limbs felt numb and heavy. She had to try not to let her knees give. Too late, she realized her sister was not alone: a woman stood in the shadows behind the oversized eggs. With a gesture, she seemed to dismiss Sinnia away, to bring what Leinore guessed would be the next victim.

Leinore felt someone grabbing her shoulder. She tried to scream, but before any air could leave her mouth, a hand clamped over her face. In her ear, a familiar voice whispered harshly, "Don't move. Here she comes."

For a moment Leinore thought Katilda meant the woman in the shadows, but instead Katilda pointed her staff at her sister with calm determination. The edge of the wood sizzled with unnatural light, and Leinore could feel the heat on her face as the staff began to gather its killing energy. Without thinking, Leinore bit down on Katilda's hand. The witch howled in pain and let go of the staff.

"You stupid girl!" Katilda growled as she crouched in the undergrowth, fumbling for her staff. "I could have saved us."

That's when the woman left the shadows and came closer, her eyes glowing green.



Saryth, the Viper's Fang | Art by: Igor Kieryluk

"Katilda," the woman sounded amused. "Is that you?"

"Why didn't you aim at her?" Leinore shouted, gesturing to the unknown woman.

"Saryth isn't the one wearing the mask," Katilda said, picking up her staff. "Your sister is. All of Saryth's power is in that mask. Sinnia is consumed by it. There is no hope for her now."

The ground beneath their feet began to tremble and heave, and Leinore found herself fighting to stay standing. She could see the treetops swaying back and forth like drunk dancers.

"What's going on?"

"It's the Coiled One. Saryth called him to chase the darkness away and has been feeding him those ensorcelled townsfolk for days now." Katilda laughed bitterly. "I was a fool to not see it sooner. She will destroy us all."

The earth below her sister split apart, revealing black soil like blood in a wound. Leinore wanted to go to her, but it was hard to steady herself, let alone walk straight. Where the fissures met, dirt and trees sank and disappeared from view. Soon, there was a gaping hole inches from where Sinnia stood.

The eggs glowed brighter, and the woman whom Katilda called Saryth lifted her staff, aiming at Leinore and Katilda.

"It is time!" Saryth screamed.

A beam of energy flashed in front of Leinore's eyes, and for an instant, she saw only green. She thought she heard Sinnia scream somewhere not too far away, and a wave of despair hit her. What if the hole had swallowed her sister and she was already too late?

When her vision cleared again, she saw him coming out of the hole—or part of him. A wall of scaly flesh writhing in front of her sister. Leinore's mind froze trying to take in the entirety of it, but she could not. No matter how much she craned her neck; her human eyes were not enough to perceive it. A sickening feeling rose in her chest. She couldn't move, her muscles frozen in fear.

“Don’t look at him!” she heard Katilda scream. “Listen to me: if he eats her while she wears the mask, we are doomed. I need your help.”

The witch was clutching her arm, wounded by Saryth’s magic. There was a nasty-looking wound where her sleeve had been torn. The cloth was drenched in blood, and pus was oozing from the raw meat underneath.

“We must destroy Sinnia. The mask won’t come off by itself.”

Leinore made herself stand straight. Every muscle in her body tightened.

“Don’t you dare touch my sister. I’ll get the mask off her.”

“She is already gone, Leinore!”

“Let me try. You have to distract Saryth for me.”

Katilda nodded.

“One chance.” She raised her staff and green sparks flew from its tip.

Leinore stumbled across the shaking earth, heading for her sister. As she looked up at the creature, two wide black eyes emerged from the surface of the scales, impossibly large.

Don’t look at it , she thought. Get it together.

Leinore touched her sister’s arm to wake her from her stupor. Sinnia’s hand was icy cold, and her eyes were burning with a bright and terrible light, a glow that seemed to Leinore unbearably old. When she looked at Leinore through the eyeholes of the mask, there was no fear, only ecstasy.

But when Leinore came closer, she heard a faint whisper from Sinnia’s lips.

“Help me.”

A deep rumbling sound came from the chasm, and Leinore realized she had not yet seen the creature’s mouth. She grabbed Sinnia’s cold arm and pulled. Sinnia let Leinore lead her passively. As they were running toward a cluster of trees, she could feel the ground fall away mere inches behind them. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Saryth aiming her staff at Katilda now. Vines lunged from the trees, like ravenous serpents, and wrapped around the hedge witch’s throat. Katilda lifted her free hand, and shale burst from the ground toward the other woman in jagged, rippling bursts. One cluster tore through the stand of trees Leinore had been running for; she threw herself and Sinnia to one side.

Katilda rose to her feet and turned to face Saryth. At her eerie whisper, a gust of wind whipped through the trees, gathering a swarm of leaves that seemed to whirl with a razor-sharp edge, attacking Saryth. She shifted her position to negate the number of deep slices on her skin, losing her balance in the process. For a moment, Leinore thought Saryth would find her footing and counterattack; Saryth’s staff was buzzing with power again. But she had forgotten the many fissures, gaping around her. Instead of landing on solid ground, her left foot went straight into one.

Saryth’s eyes bulged in surprise as she spread her arms, desperate to grab onto something, her staff dropping from her hand. But there was nothing to grab onto, no vines left. And in an instant, Saryth was gone—swallowed by the chasm.

Leinore grabbed Sinnia, who struggled feebly in her arms. The mask seemed to have fused itself into her skin. Leinore tried to find an edge to peel it off but there was no beginning and no ending.

The ground shuddered again as the massive serpent moved. Its passage felt like the end of the world, and it was coming for Sinnia. Far, far above them all, the Coiled One opened a mouth as wide as any chasm, ready to swallow them both.

We must destroy her. Katilda's words echoed in Leinore's mind. She could make out the witch somewhere on the other side of the hole. Her sister's face was so calm, it made her nauseous. She had never seen anyone look so peaceful, even as the monstrous creature approached. Sinnia was still whispering something. In what she was sure would be their final moments, Leinore leaned in closer to hear.

"Rip it off"

Leinore reached a hand to the mask and touched her sister's skin. Or what felt like her skin. Without thinking she started to pull as hard as she could. Her nails sank inside Sinnia's cheek and for the first time she screamed.

It's working.

She pulled harder.

The mask started to rip like a piece of wet parchment. The Coiled One's breath was hot and damp above them, coming in horrible rotten waves as it bent that tremendous head toward them.

One last pull.

Sinnia screamed, or was it the beast?

When the mask came off it turned back into the hard thing made of sticks and leaves. Sinnia's face was so red and raw, Leinore almost didn't recognize her. But that awful glow had left Sinnia's eyes.

"Sinnia?" Leinore stared at her face for a hard minute, searching for her sister.

"Thank you," Sinnia said, her voice faint. She blinked a few times, and then her stare focused on Leinore.

They were interrupted with a sound like a hurricane, a bellow of primal rage from the massive creature Saryth had unleashed. Leinore covered her ears reflexively, but it seemed to be in the throes of some kind of agony. It was retreating—actually retreating—down, down, into the chasm from which it had come. With one last hiss, the Coiled One dragged its body to the depths of the earth, pulling eggs and surrounding foliage down. The ground shook one more time before Leinore and Sinnia lost sight of it.

Leinore let the mask go. As it tumbled down the cavernous hole, she pulled her sister up with all the strength she had left, and with Katilda, they limped back to the settlement. Noises were coming from different parts of the woods; yelling, and crying, and even some laughter.

Soon, they found people stumbling around, wondering among themselves how they got there and which day of the festival it was. Members of the Dawnhart Coven were gently leading people back toward the Celestus. Nobody was spewing snakes, and there were none in the undergrowth either. Just leaves and frost under her feet. Nobody seemed to remember it, and not a soul asked about the guttural noises that shook the woods. If there weren't still so many missing, it would have been like nothing had happened.

Leinore knew that wasn't true, though. And from the look on Sinnia's face, she knew her sister would remember what had happened tonight forever. Before the festivalgoers enveloped her completely, Leinore turned and looked back into the woods. She felt it only faintly—the rustle in the trees, under the earth, as if a presence was passing her by.

The Harvesttide Sovereign shivered and turned away.