Chapter 07 – the Witch and the Warlock

First of all, you should know that I am with your best, childhood friend Elmur now, and he is a saint of a man.

..

Second, you have literally no right to be here, right now, or in the future, unless I see fit to grant you that right, sometime - a time of my own choosing - in the future.

“That's not likely, is it?” Witch Too whispered to witch One, when neither thought a crow was listening.

“Yes, I was a witch in love. I was a lot of things, in matters of love. And I was a witch in many, many more things than that, old man. I was a witch in the kitchen, like my mother, and hers, and I was a witch on the battlefield, more than once, and you know this well. I have the scars. Do you remember those? Where they fall on my skin, and how many there are now?”

Oakely was trying to do the math in his head, having been presented with a numbers question, which he was sure he would get correct, and became unbalanced as she stepped another foot forward. The other witches, as was their nature, stepped lightly into subtle stances at her sides, but three full paces back, and not without an air of uncertainty. The lines between them, however, were clear, and they converged at the space just before the bridge of his nose, like a lit match.

He should have chosen better tactical ground. He had forgotten the rules of engagement.

“I have been a witch for the people of this village, too - the village which loves me, the one which you left, without a second thought, so that you could go and fix another pipe, in some other town. You’re not here to say your peace, let’s be clear – you are here on a plumbing errand, and you and I both know you would rather it not be *here* that you have to do it.”

“Bee-“

Beatrice silently cut his words short, with a raised finger, and a sharp, clear thought, *Don’t Bee me*, and stepped back, with a barely perceptible waver. The nearly-forgotten fainting feelings had stirred in her again. This was half the reason she was so upset right now, though nobody but her sisters could – or would – know that.

Oakely, as always, was studiously catching up, word by word, and felt stir an angry ember he thought had extinguished itself years ago. He was *not* a fixer of “pipes”. It was far, far more complicated than that. His old, younger self would have bristled and boiled madly at the manner she belittled the things he did – the things he *loved* – but he checked himself, as they were not alone, and he knew how to be civil, in company. He was outnumbered here anyway, within one whispering inch of a Sharp Poke, (triple-witched only, but those could still leave a mark, he knew it well, and they had aligned themselves masterfully, for such a young group), so he stepped back from the house by another step, away from its arrayed warding women, and inwardly tamped the fire in his belly down, muttering to Will, steam rising slightly from the back of his neck as he did so.

Elmur seemed only mildly interested in the entire exchange, and was instead taking in Oakely’s new height with characteristically keen interest. The men had always been a mismatch, height-wise, but this would require a complete recalibration of the old rubrics. Once they got around to that part of the reunion, that is. Elmur was not yet aware that the evening, as far as Oakely’s visit to the house was concerned, was very nearly already over. Had he known, he would have felt disappointed sooner, rather than slightly later.

Face reddened, struggling slightly with containing the pressure building in his various real and replacement parts, the engineer ---

“I was your *bark*, Oakely! Your actual, knotty, rigid, tenaciously thick, *stupid* bark, damn you! And what were *you,* to *me*? You were the unyielding, prideful, thick-beyond-measures, all-encompassing, yearning force of determination, growing away from and out of me, upwards, always. And to what?”

“To what?” She echoed again, in a lowering voice, to the empty moment of silence that followed, to all of them and nobody in particular. “The *crows* only know”.

She turned and walked away, at that, repeating "only the crows" to her self, in her retreat, her sisters-in-practice folding in behind her, like a curtain. The younger, Agnest, glanced back at Elmur and then to Oakely briefly, caring and uncertain. She hadn’t yet been through this particular mill yet, so she did not yet know – her heart was still bright and unwounded.

Elmur had just stood stoically through the brief encounter, like the reliable tentpole that he was, watching Beatrice as she said her peace, and then his old friend, as he failed to come up with a notable response of any kind. The taller of the two friends – taller now by an additional armspan - was always a stabilizing point of reference in any given circumstance. The day he first shuffled into it, things around town had gotten more dry and comfortable generally, for everyone. This was commonly acknowledged and accepted, more or less unanimously.

“It’s good to have you back, my friend.” Elmur spoke, I wish it were under far less awkward circumstances.”, he offered, after a brief pause.

\*Growing seasons needed dry spells too, was the going theory at that time.