Chapter 07 – the Witch and the Wizard

Beatrice Sylvie Billbothers was once described by a neighbour as an older version of Marion, from the adventure movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. This was a pretty accurate comparison; Marion had been a most awesome heroine, and so was Beatrice (or just Bee to her friends, of which she had many).

Bee had greying, berry-straw hair which went that way and this, for she liked to cut it herself with the garden shears now and then, when she had serious thinking to do. At the moment, she certainly had thinking to do, and so she was sporting her hair in a variety of lengths, all managed in starchy tufts, shoots, tails of pigs and tails of ponies. The effect was energetic, distracted, vaguely magical, and unintentionally humorous, which is to say, it was all a natural extension of Bee, when she was being her true self.

Below her hair, Bee enjoyed wearing patchwork arrangements of shawls, shirts, vests, and skirts, made from whatever wayward fabrics happened her way through the turning of the seasons, in the old, drafty-warm house she shared with her two sisters, now both gone – one ten years ago, and the other only that Summer.

It had been a very sunny, hot August, and Beebe could not for the life of her recall when she had been given the news that her sister had finally passed. She had gone into a kind of deep grieving only the original witches in the valley still practiced. This grieving was focused, practical, raw, and required a kind of solitude no longer easily found, with the advent of email and video conferencing and snapchat and all the things the young people in town liked to use to stay connected to the broader world, and to the elders in the town. Annie Fey – that was the sister most recently passed – had opened a Facebook account the previous year, in order to follow their grand-niece’s adventures and share “memes” (whatever those were). Now the page was a memorial, a place for all of the people in town to post memories, photos, poems and thoughts, images of sunsets and sunrises with interesting, flowy fonts and thoughtful sentiments, suited for hanging on a wall or maybe printing on a t-shirt. Bee steered clear of the page, which was easy, given she had no computer, or internet, and frequently, no electricity.

When she had finally emerged from her grieving spell, she discovered, to her delight, that she had apparently found some forgotten, mostly black tablecloth (possibly from the attic), and had fashioned this into a breezy-but-reserved mourning dress for the funeral. She had impressed herself with the stitching and hems, all done by hand with machine-precision, and had since taken to wearing it around the property when the sun and wind were in certain configurations, such as they were today.

“Anne”, said Bee, through the kitchen window, to the winding drive leading through the spruce and pine and downward into the valley, “I forgot to ask you where you wanted the jars to go”. She was referring to Annie Fey’s impressive collection of mason jars – now washed and arranged on the old dining room table, where puzzles usually went. Annie had had accumulated the jars over the last few years for growing various kind of sprouts to put in her sandwiches and salads.

Annie Fey loved sprouts in her sandwiches and salads, and had grown enough sprouts to fill every sandwich and salad to be found within twenty kilometers in all directions. She would give the sprouts as gifts, in exchange for jars. One jar of sprouts in exchange for two empty jars, was thr going rate Bee could have cared less about sandwiches, salads, or sprouts– she was more of a lasagna woman. Annie Fey had joked that Bee would inherit the mason jars when she was gone, but Bee did not find this funny to talk about, so had blocked the whole thing out. Now she wished she had discussed what should be done with the jars, since the household no longer had use for sprouts, or quite so many jars.

The Shade in the Spruce

The Old Grey Maid

The Weird on the Water

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

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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 one 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.

“Bea-“

*Don’t Bea me*, Beattie silently cut his words short, with a raised finger, and a sharp, clear thought, 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 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 at the manner she always 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 Jab, (triple-witched only, but those could still leave a mark, he knew it well), 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 with Will’s help, 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 will, 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.

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