



THE DEEPEST SLUMBER

A LOVELESS LETTERS
SHORT STORY

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SANDRA

Sandra shook Curtis violently but it was no use. He wouldn't rouse.

"What's going on? What's wrong? What happened?" Curtis's dad rushed from the dining room table where, just moments ago, he had been enjoying a game of cards with Cleo. Now, he dropped to the floor at his son's side.

Sandra moved back, allowing Mr. Loveless some space. "Your wife - well, not your wife, but kind of your wife. A book copy or something. A double? And Lindsay," she started to cry. "I don't know where Lindsay is. They have her, I think."

She wanted to be stronger. She willed herself to stop crying but she couldn't. The portal hopping and jumping into books had seemed so fun and exotic, at first. And the more she was wrapped up in dreams of Lindsay (and watching those dreams come true), the more fantastical it all felt. But now... things were different. She felt a little scared when she became invisible in the Ashen Afterworld and the evil storybook witch locked her under the stairs, but never had she felt as terrified as she did in this moment.

Mr. Loveless quickly checked Curtis over and, assessing that he was well enough, lifted him from the floor and carried him to the couch. He turned to Sandra as he sat in the recliner, leaning forward to place his elbows onto his knees. "Ok, just breathe," he instructed.

Sandra sat on the floor, unable to bring herself to a higher elevation. For some reason, the very idea of sitting in a chair felt disrespectful to everything happening around her.

Mr. Loveless turned his attention toward the dining room. "Cleo!" he called, his voice cracking a little.

Aunt Cleo rushed past the kitchen doorway, through the dining room, into the living room. She looked at Curtis on the couch, then at Sandra who pulled herself backwards into the room. "What's going on?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," he said, turning to Sandra.

Aunt Cleo pulled a chair in from the dining table and slowly lowered herself onto it. "What's happened, kiddo?" she asked Sandra who calmed a little at her easy demeanor.

"I - uh," Sandra wasn't sure what to say. How could she be certain that this Cleo was the real Cleo. She let her eyes move to Mr. Loveless. How could she know he was the real Mr. Loveless? She darted her eyes back and forth before deciding she really had no other options.

She launched into the story, starting with her phone call to Lindsay and their portal hop to London. She breezed over most of the details about Nana Rose's letters and got straight to the point about the doubles of Aunt Cleo and Mrs. Loveless.

Mr. Loveless had no words, as usual. For a lover of books who happened to be married to a mystical woman in a family of portal hoppers, he sure didn't know much and never really seemed to ask a lot of questions.

"I think I know what's happening here," Aunt Cleo offered, a hint of remorse in her voice.

LINDSAY

Lindsay's fake mother tossed a pile of papers into the air. "Generations and generations of witches," she exclaimed. "Your grandmother had all the records. You might have been born with *some* power, but the best of it comes when you learn the spells and incantations and when you learn to use the amulets and charms." She held up an opal pendant that swirled with tiny clouds of starlight.

"And this," she laughed, "this one sends you to the cosmos."

"Just like your grandmother," fake Aunt Cleo said, pulling up a chair and pushing Lindsay into it. She turned her attention to Lindsay's fake mother. "Are you sure we can't send her there, too? It was just so pretty and sparkly the last time."

"No. This one goes to the catacombs in case we need her for leverage."

Lindsay knew she should be planning, plotting, finding some way out of her fake aunt's grasp, but her mind was swirling. A witch? Generations of witches? Spells? Charms? Cosmos?

Wait. Nana Rose *wasn't* dead. Curtis was right.

Her heart sank at the thought of her brother. But it ignited at the thought of Nana Rose still being alive. Whether it was nearby or somewhere 'in the cosmos,' she was alive. Which meant that she could see her again. Talk to her again. Learn from her again. It seemed she still had a lot to learn, after all. But where was this cosmos and how could she get there without the cosmo amulet?

Fake Aunt Cleo pulled up the floorboards in front of Lindsay's chair. They moved smooth as butter and Lindsay wondered if they'd practiced this scenario or if Nana Rose had always kept an ill-cobbled makeshift floor over a catacomb prison.

Her fake aunt lifted the metal grate that sat below and let it fall open with a loud clank. She grabbed Lindsay by the arm and pulled her toward the opening. Lindsay fought back, writhing beneath her unbelievably strong grip.

"Get off me," she demanded. "Let me go!"

She tried to gather some sort of magical strength of her own but found none. She tried to spin a portal to push fake Aunt Cleo through but nothing happened when she spun her wrist. She tried again and only the faintest shimmer of green appeared before quickly vanishing into the air.

Her fake mother laughed behind her. "As I said," she held up a glistening black stone, "much stronger with the amulets." She tucked the stone into her pocket. "Now, I might not have any in-born talents like your lot, but it doesn't mean I can't learn magic the old way." She narrowed her eyes. "And twenty or so years trapped between the pages of a book gives one plenty of time to learn."

Fake Aunt Cleo pushed Lindsay through the opening in the floor. Lindsay hardly had enough time to grab the ladder as she fell. She felt something tear in her shoulder as she gripped the rungs to stop herself from falling to the stone ground below.

CURTIS

Curtis awoke inside a dark abyss. He was standing, as though he had simply walked to this strange destination. The ground beneath his feet felt rather solid, if not a little squishy. Cool air brushed his face with the scent of roses and cotton candy. In an instant he knew.

“Nana Rose?” he called.

Silence hung around him. There was no hint of her besides the scent. No sounds. He didn’t even catch an echo of his own voice. It was as though it was vacuumed from his lips as soon as they parted or simply drifted off into the void.

He waited, suddenly feeling more patient than he had in his entire life. With nothing to see, nowhere to go, and no idea what was happening, he would have expected himself to panic and run aimlessly in every direction. Instead, he sat on the solid, squishy floor of the void, sniffing the air as the scent of his grandmother grew stronger.

A song drifted into his mind, bouncing off itself in echoes that folded over each other like waves lapping on the beach. He closed his eyes to the void and breathed deeply, focusing his mind on only the song. A memory of Nana Rose baking pies flashed in his mind. He had to have been only about four years old. How could he remember it so clearly? She patted dough into pie tins as she hummed the simple, old melody to herself.

If anyone asked him to explain it, Curtis wouldn’t have been able to. But something about this memory called him forward. It was as though it had laid out a map in his mind. A pathway to navigate the darkness that enshrouded him.

He stood and began walking forward. He couldn’t see the ground or the sky. He didn’t know if it was ground or floor; sky or ceiling. He saw no walls. No trees. No obstacles. But he also saw no open spaces. No pathways. He could walk himself face-first into a wall at any moment and not see it coming. Except that he would, somehow, see it coming.

He twisted and turned his way through the darkness, navigating the invisible path with a confidence and certainty that he had never felt before.

Time twisted upon itself the way that the sounds echoed and folded and Curtis couldn’t be sure exactly how much time had passed from his awakening to the moment that he saw the first glimmer of light. He estimated it to be somewhere between one minute and one month. Anything more precise than that would have been difficult to calculate. He drew closer to the light and in a flash found that his surroundings shifted and all darkness was washed away.

“There you are,” a familiar voice drifted softly from the corners of the blurry room he suddenly found himself inside of.

“Mom,” he sighed, relieved. Given what had just happened, Curtis would have expected himself to be weary. In the best of times he struggled to trust his surroundings. But with a fake version of his mother and his aunt, and now a shift between realities as he wandered the cosmos, Curtis should have been skeptical. But he wasn’t. It was as if the knowing he felt was growing stronger inside of him with each passing moment. And he knew that while it wasn’t her, it also *was* her, all the same.

"I'm just a projection of my thoughts and love" his mother answered, as though reading his thoughts.

She took his hand and led him through the room. The floor twisted into familiar patterns beneath his feet. The tile of their kitchen when he was just little, the carpet in Aunt Cleo's apartment hallway. The walls shifted in and out of focus, as though the room couldn't quite decide what it wanted to be.

The minutes passed like mere seconds then folded upon themselves and stretched out into hours. Lights dragged like trails around them as they moved at what felt like warp speed. But Curtis felt every beat of his heart in slow motion. He had no idea how much time had passed even since he'd arrived in the cosmos.

Curtis stopped walking and pulled back on her hand, pausing her movement long enough for him to appraise the almost empty look in her eyes. She wasn't fully his mother. She wasn't really there. But she lifted her hands to his cheeks and spoke the words he needed to hear. "You really are stronger than you know. And I'm so sorry I didn't see it sooner. Your Nana knew, though. She knew all along."

Just as Curtis was about to question her point she buckled at the knees and dropped to the floor beside him and disappeared into a sparkling white fog.

Curtis panicked, dropping to his knees where she had been just moments before. "Mom? Mom?"

Curtis was reminded that he still didn't know where his real mother was. For all his *knowing* he couldn't figure it out. The song drifted back in over his thoughts and Nana Rose's humming voice pulled him forward.

SANDRA

"I'm afraid this might be my fault," Aunt Cleo raised her hand and moved to the centre of the room. She turned to her brother-in-law, "I'm really very sorry, Larry."

"What's going on, Cleo?" Mr. Loveless demanded, his voice louder than Sandra had ever heard it. In fact, it occurred to Sandra that she'd never seen Mr. Loveless upset. She and Lindsay had been seeing quite a lot of each other over the past few months and the rest of the Loveless family just came part-in-parcel. Though he seemed perpetually tired from running the store and handling most of the home duties while Mrs. Loveless was away a lot helping Nana Rose, he really never seemed to be upset about it. But now, as Sandra watched an anger flash in his eyes she knew it was born more of fear than anything else.

Aunt Cleo raised herself from her chair and began pacing the room as she spoke. "It was when I was a young woman. I didn't know how I felt about being a witch. It was all fun and games when we were kids, just hopping portals around the countryside. But, the older I got, the more I needed to learn and the more I realized that there was a lot that could go wrong." She paused and stared at the ceiling as though she could see right through it and into her own memory. "And a lot I wanted to do that was forbidden."

She shook her head and brought herself back to the moment, catching Sandra's curious expression. "Nothing bad, dear. There was love I found in the pages of a storybook and it was one I couldn't bring to life. To come from a book and into our world, a being needs to take the place of another being. It would have meant sentencing someone to an eternity withering away in the cosmos, just to be with my love." She sighed. "So, I left him in his pages and took my frustrations out in a diary."

Sandra recounted the twisted version of herself and Lindsay that came to life when they hopped a portal into Lindsay's diary. "And you should never portal hop into a true story," she said.

Aunt Cleo nodded. "I knew you'd understand."

Sandra tilted her head. "Well, sort of. I still don't understand how they came *out* of the diary, though. That never happened with Lindsay."

"Given enough time," Mr. Loveless chimed in, "characters in a real story can grow aware of their situation."

Sandra and Cleo stared at him, jaws hanging down.

"What?" he asked, feigning offence. "I read the books that your mom sends, you know. I'm not as daft to the world of magical things as you think I am."

Cleo straightened herself. "Well, my apologies."

Mr. Loveless continued, "And with magical beings, if they become aware, they can conjure *some* of the magic of their real world counterpart and use it to escape the pages."

Cleo pursed her lips and shrugged in a way that said, *Wow, he's actually right.*

"I should have destroyed that book a long time ago. There's really no excuse for it. Especially after I made Lindsay destroy hers. There were just some memories in there I didn't want to let go of." She sighed. "It was foolish and cocky."

"But how can you be sure?" Sandra asked. "Couldn't they be from somewhere else?"

Cleo shook her head. "There are some things I can't explain, dear. But sometimes I just *know*." She smiled. "Something I suspect that Curtis might know a thing or two about, if Nana Rose was truthful in her letters to me."

Sandra wasn't quite sure what she meant by that, but she remembered the way that Curtis seemed a lot less, Curtis, at the library.

"What do we do, now?" she asked Aunt Cleo as she turned her attention back toward Curtis, who still laid motionless on the couch.

The question hung in the air for a moment, waiting for an answer to be plucked from some invisible realm.

"I think, we wait," Aunt Cleo answered.

"How can we possibly just *wait*, Cleo?" Mr. Loveless threw his arms up.

Cleo perched herself on the arm of the couch beside him and Curtis, placing a hand on Curtis's back. "I don't know much, but I suspect this is the great event my mother told me of her letters. She was incredibly vague, but she said something was going to happen and I just needed to let it ride itself out. That it was important for the children to learn to solve this one, themselves." She threw a side eye at Sandra.

"What?" Sandra's eyes shifted from Aunt Cleo to Mr. Loveless and back again. "I don't know what to do." In all of their adventures it had been Lindsay who took the lead. It was Lindsay who was quick on her feet and filled to the brim with magic. What on Earth could Sandra possibly do?

LINDSAY

Lindsay gripped strongly to the ladder with one arm while ignoring the ache in the other. She tried to pull herself back up through the opening, but fake Aunt Cleo pushed her head down with her foot and slammed the grate on top of her. She tried to yell but her voice was soon muffled beneath the floorboards as fake Aunt Cleo reassembled them above her.

Defeated for the moment, Lindsay slowly lowered herself down the ladder into the ambient darkness below.

"Think, Lindsay," she said to herself, absently rubbing her arm as she paced in the darkness. Tiny slivers of light shone through the cracks between the floorboards above but hardly illuminated the room. She needed light.

She smiled to herself and began reciting words she heard Aunt Cleo use once during a power outage. An incantation. The wicked doppelgangers *did* say that they made a witch stronger. And if they were blocking some of her magic...

She finished the incantation and snapped her fingers.

Nothing.

"Ugh, come on," she muttered, trying again.

Nothing.

The ache of defeat nagged at the edges of her mind hard enough to pull her down. She plunked on the hard concrete floor, immediately feeling a chill run through her as its dampness sank into her bones.

For a moment, Lindsay allowed herself to get lost in her thoughts. A rare feeling of insecurity shuddered through her. She'd never felt less sure of herself or her power. She had never felt like there wasn't an option.

And, so, there must be one, she thought to herself.

As if answering her silent prayer, a squeaky sound stirred to life in the corner of the room. A rush of tiny feet drew closer, then further, then closer, again.

Lindsay strained her eyes, following the sound with her eyes, unable to make out a shape until the tiny creature found its way into a tiny crack of light from above. It stood still, a moment - just long enough for Lindsay's mouth to drop open in disbelief.

A white rat with a mischievous face peered back at her. Abruptly, it turned away, revealing an even curiuser detail - a pocket watch strapped to its back.

She may not have been able to conjure fire or use her powers to spin a portal, but she hadn't lost her sharp mind. Her letter from Nana Rose had been in no other book than Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

"Follow your brother," she said to herself, recounting the letter from Nana Rose. "Well, he's always been a bit of a rat, hasn't he?"

The rat scurried, jumping from one crack of light to another along the concrete floor and Lindsay pulled herself to her feet to follow. She quickened her pace as she followed the sound until something caught her foot in the darkness and splayed her out onto her chest. She gathered herself, still able to hear the pattering of tiny feet as they moved in circles nearby, slowly growing further away.

As she rolled herself over to stand, Lindsay caught a familiar scent that caused her pause.

"Mom?" She felt around, frantically, in the darkness until her hand grasped the warmth of her mother's leg. She pulled herself face to face. Though the darkness made it impossible to see, Lindsay could feel her mother's breath on her cheek and let herself melt with relief.

But her mother made no sounds and no attempt to move.

The distant pattering sounds of the rat's tiny feet called for Lindsay's attention and she felt her heart tear in two as she remembered Nana Rose's words. *Follow your brother.*

"I'll come back for you," she whispered in her mother's ear.

The cracks of flight grew further and further apart until Lindsay found herself following the rat's movements out of pure instinct. As she heard its footsteps slow she slowed her own and crouched low to the ground, feeling around with her hands. Surely there had to be a hole in the ground or something Alice's Adventures in Wonderland-y.

Her hands found a wall just as she heard the rat's footsteps grow further away, to her left. She turned trying to find it in the darkness, but found something else entirely. A small, shimmering circle of light broke a hole in the wall, casting a walkway between worlds.

Someone had left a portal in the catacombs. Her mom? Nana Rose? If it had been her mom, why hadn't she used it? She looked back in the darkness searching for answers in the direction of her mother's mostly lifeless body. Lindsay heard the rat's footsteps come to a halt at the portal's edge.

There wasn't time to figure it out, now.

She shuffled over to the opening, just large enough for her to crawl through. Thankfully, she had tucked her gift from Nana Rose into the back waistband of her jeans. She tossed the book into the portal and hoped for the best.

SANDRA

“Think, Sandra, think,” she muttered to herself as she paced the Loveless living room. She moved to and fro past Curtis’s limp body, going over the day’s events in her mind.

Mr. Loveless kept a keen watch on Aunt Cleo who simply sat, waiting, allowing Sandra to take her time.

“The diary!” Sandra snapped around to face Aunt Cleo. “Where is your diary?”

The hint of a smirk tilted the corners of Aunt Cleo’s mouth as she answered, “It’s probably tucked away where I left it at my mother’s house when I was young.”

“So, if the copies are from the book, could we not force them back into it? Or - ” The idea presented itself in her mind as if gifted there by someone else. “What if we destroy it?”

Aunt Cleo couldn’t help but let her smile spread. “Now you’re thinking, kid.”

“But what about Curtis and Penelope and Nana Rose? What happens to them? And Lindsay. Where is Lindsay?” Mr. Loveless’ hands began to shake as he realised the magnitude of the situation.

But Aunt Cleo stood strong, certain.

“Why aren’t you more concerned, Cleo?” he demanded.

“Mom told me something was coming,” she began.

“And you think the kids need to deal with it,” he finished. “I think this might be bigger than she thought.

But Cleo trusted her mother implicitly and didn’t budge.

“Hmm,” Sandra was pacing, again, contemplating the problem. “The distance is a bit of an obstacle. Your mom’s house is an entire ocean away. You can spin a portal though, right? We can go there, now?”

“Woah, wait,” Mr. Loveless protested, his palms in the air. “You said that there are evil copies of my wife and Cleo, there. And you just want to spin a portal and run right in?”

“Well, surely they aren’t in my childhood bedroom, right now,” she scoffed, tossing Mr. Loveless a raised eyebrow. She moved her attention to Sandra’s hopeful eyes. “But I won’t be spinning you a portal, dear. You’ll have to do that one yourself.”

“But, I - I can’t do *that*, Aunt Cleo. You know that.”

Cleo tilted her head and shrugged her shoulders. “Do I, dear?”

She crossed the room and moved behind Sandra. “You’ve moved through plenty a magical portal already in your life. You’ve almost certainly collected a little magic along the way. Just clear your mind.”

Aunt Cleo placed her hands on Sandra's shoulders, feeling them settle beneath her gentle touch.

"OK, kiddo. Just breathe in and picture the place you want to go."

Sandra winked open an eye. "But, I don't know what your bedroom looks like."

Cleo patted her shoulder. "Focus. It doesn't need to be exact. Just picture what you think it looks like. Your intention will do the rest. Picture it. See it in your mind. Feel the warmth of the room. Smell it. Know it. Now imagine all that sensation floating down through your arm to your fingertips. Feel them start to tingle, sparkle, even. And when you feel the glow in your fingers, just turn your wrist clockwise."

Sandra opened her eyes and saw the shimmer of a tiny portal illuminating before her. She jumped back a few inches, nearly knocking Aunt Cleo off her feet.

"Keep at it, kid. You almost got it."

LINDSAY

Though it was entirely dark on the other side of the portal, a shimmering white light revealed itself in the distance as she pulled her feet through the opening. The rat had disappeared from sight and sound but Lindsay knew the way the moment she saw a figure moving inside the shimmering light.

"Curtis!" she called. But her voice was swallowed up in the void that stood between her and the shimmer. She scrambled to her feet and ran.

"Curtis!"

Her voice was faint, but it tore through his focus. Nana Rose's melody splintered and disappeared from his mind, replaced by an unfamiliar tone in his sister's voice.

"Curtis," she was breathless as her quivering form appeared beside him, still adjusting to the refraction of light in the cosmos.

Lindsay doubled over, clutching her shoulder as she caught her breath.

"Linds - are you OK? How did you - " But he didn't need to finish asking her. He already knew. The emotion inside her was too strong for him *not* to hear it.

He waited for her to catch her breath and bring her eyes to meet his.

"Mom will be OK," he assured her.

Before Lindsay could properly twist her expression to question him, he turned his attention away from her, leaving the dark void behind her to focus on a flower-strewn cobblestone pathway that had just revealed itself ahead.

"Come on."

“Where are we?” she asked, quickening her step to match his determined pace. “Is this the cosmos?”

Curtis nodded without glancing back at his sister. He didn’t want to explain it much further. He didn’t want to tell her that although he knew it had only been about an hour, it felt like a year since he’d seen her last. He didn’t want to tell her about how much time he spent following Nana Rose’s voice and the same song repeating over and over in his mind.

“Sure is.” He felt his sister’s impatience behind him. She wasn’t accustomed to him taking the lead. “I can’t explain it, entirely, but I know Nana Rose is here and that we need to find her.”

He stopped as the path split in two in front of them.

Lindsay watched as Curtis closed his eyes, deciding which path to take. Without much of a hesitation of consideration, he moved onto the path to the left, leading Lindsay into a foggy meadow that turned into a rainy city street that led to the Loveless Letters Bookshop.

The world around them swayed and flickered, reminding Lindsay that although it was real to them, it wasn’t, in fact, real at all. The vision of the storefront sparked a memory of the first time she had heard the word “cosmos.” Incidentally, it was also the last time she had ever seen her best childhood friend Peggy Sue Whittaker.

But there was no time to think about that, now. There was no time to worry that she could get lost and never be found. Or that Curtis, or her mom, or Nana Rose...

No, there was no time.

She hurried behind Curtis, careful to stay close on his heels. They dodged puddles of starlight as they made their way to the door of the shop. It was eerie how similar it looked to their real store. From the lettering on the windows to the bell inside the door - every detail was perfect. Plucked from the recesses of someone’s mind.

Curtis turned back to smile, softly, at his sister before opening the door.

Relief flooded through Lindsay’s veins like a sedative wave as she first laid eyes on Nana Rose sitting on the bookshop’s circular reading rug. Books were piled nearly to the ceiling, encapsulating her in a semicircle of literature.

Lindsay could see she was tired, but Nana Rose’s determination could light a thousand fires even in her most difficult moments. She stood back watching as her brother moved through the room with a determined confidence she had never before witnessed.

“Nana,” he said, kneeling on the rug. “I’ve come for you. But I don’t know what to do next.”

Nana Rose lifted her gaze from the book on her lap, moving so slowly that Lindsay couldn’t imagine how she’d had time to read the stacks of books around her. She didn’t say a word, but reached into her breast pocket and pulled out a black obsidian gemstone, hanging from a chain. She struggled to raise her hands to place it over Curtis’s neck. He bowed his head, allowing the chain to fall, heavy, over his neck.

As Curtis patiently waited for their grandmother to collect herself enough to speak, Lindsay let her eyes dance along the spines of the stacks that surrounded her.

The Witch's Guide to the Cosmos

Stardust and Starborn Souls

When Wild Things Go Into the Great Goodnight

Navigating Time and Tales: A Map of the Cosmos

Unfamiliar titles of unfamiliar books which certainly were not housed in the version of the Loveless Letters bookstore that Lindsay was familiar with. But it didn't take long for her to discern what Nana Rose had been up to while she awaited rescue.

"Curtis," Nana Rose's frail voice echoed through the room as if it floated on a tinny vibration - barely audible to the human ear - a stark contrast from the steady sound of Curtis's voice just moments before.

She smiled, watching him draw closer to hear her better. "You found your way this far," she said. "You can do the rest. This will protect you."

Curtis wondered just how much the tiny black stone could protect him if she was in such disrepair.

But Nana Rose knew this thoughts. "I hid it here, a long time ago. I couldn't get to my own at home before they came. I had nothing to protect me in my aging condition with my magic fading. But this one, this one will protect you now." She tapped the necklace.

"These books," Lindsay interrupted. "You've found her?"

THE DOUBLES

The fake Penelope Loveless was busy gathering the ingredients for her potion when fake Aunt Cleo interrupted with terrible news.

"Cleo! Cleo! Get over here," the wicked witch called to her sister. She dumped a few ingredients into her pot as a twisted smile curled across her face.

Fake Aunt Cleo scurried to her sister's side, a scrying mirror in one hand, a book in another.

Fake Mrs. Loveless glanced in her direction. "How are you watching those kids if you're reading a *book*, Cleo? Why is your head always in the clouds?" She slapped the book from fake Cleo's hand. "Where are those children?" she demanded.

"It seems the boy has made his way to his grandmother," she said, as she held out the mirror in her sister's direction. "And, somehow, he appears to have gathered his sister from our world." A glint of excitement flickered in fake Aunt Cleo's eyes.

Fake Mrs. Loveless spun around so quickly that her ladle splashed a stinging juice into her sister's eyes. "What?" she shrieked as she snatched the mirror away to have a look for herself.

"How could you let this happen you nitwit? Why didn't you say anything sooner?"

Fake Aunt Cleo certainly could have said something sooner, had she wanted to. Instead, she watched the events unfold through the mirror, secretly hoping the children would succeed so she could go back to her home in the diary.

The wicked witch smashed the mirror over fake Cleo's head, sending tiny fragments of Lindsay and Curtis scattering across the floor.

She hurried to the table where papers and books of spells were strewn about in a frantic mess, as fake Cleo cobbled the bits of glass back together on the floor. A snap of her fingers and the glass reassembled itself into the mirror she'd held just moments before.

Fake Mrs. Loveless seized the mirror from her sister's grip and swirled her hand in front of it, casting a tiny portal to the world inside. She made no attempt to move herself through it. She simply used the portal as a listening device, enhancing the mirror's innate scrying ability.

The sisters listened as Lindsay asked Nana Rose about Peggy Sue Whittaker and watched as Nana Rose simply shook her head in defeat. When they heard Nana Rose offer Curtis an escape route, the fake Mrs. Loveless knew it was time to step in.

She checked her left pocket for the cosmo amulet while slipping a bottle of her potion in the other and waited for Curtis and Lindsay to abandon Nana Rose in favor of a misty forest pathway leading to an ocean made of tears. She then placed the mirror on the floor, spun a tiny portal atop its glass, took her sister's hand, and stepped into the tiny portal, one foot at a time.

SANDRA

It took three tries, but Sandra finally opened her first full portal. And since she was heading somewhere in the real world, it wouldn't take a book for her to hop.

She looked back at Aunt Cleo, searching for a reassurance that she quickly found but could not feel.

"You can do this, kid." Cleo gently turned Sandra's shoulders back toward the portal. "It's probably hidden behind one of my bookshelves," she told her before giving her a gentle nudge forward.

Sandra drew in a deep breath and let it out quickly, forcing herself through the shimmering gateway before she had a chance to change her mind.

In an instant, she was halfway across the world, standing in Cleo's dusty childhood bedroom. In the distance, she heard the fake versions of Mrs. Loveless and Aunt Cleo bickering. Then, suddenly, she heard nothing at all. Unaware of their abrupt departure, a sinking worry shuddered through Sandra's mind. What if they knew she was there?

She was afraid to move. Afraid to creak a single floorboard beneath her feet. She let her eyes scan the room, even though a small part of her was worried that even *that* would be detected by the diary sisters.

Quickly, she spotted two bookcases pushed up against the furthest wall. About fifteen feet of uncarpeted wooden floor lay between her and bookcases. Plenty of room for squeaks. Then, of course, there was the issue of *moving* the bookcase to see behind it.

Sandra held her breath and summoned every ounce of courage she could find. She reminded herself that Lindsay would be able to do it. And if Lindsay could do it; she could do it. At least, that's what she told herself in the moments she most needed help being brave.

She tiptoed across the room as gently as she could, grateful for her small frame and light step. She hadn't made it even two feet before she heard someone coming up the stairs.

Her heart sped as she turned to realize the door behind her was open, leaving her exposed.

The stairs creaked louder, closer. The movement hastened.

Sandra stood, frozen, unable to will herself to move.

Until she heard it. A distant growling sound, rounding a corner and moving toward the open doorway.

It wasn't the sisters, at all.

She sprang toward the door, slamming it shut, but not before catching a glimpse of a German Shepherd baring its teeth as it approached. It wasn't the teeth or the menacing growl that caught her attention, though. It was the red and black clouds swirling in its eyes that shocked her most.

At sight of her, the dog sprang into action. Furious snarls and scratches stormed on the other side of the door. Sandra raced across the room, no longer worried about her footsteps. She pulled the first bookcase from the wall so hard it toppled over. A flurry of books scattered out onto the floor as it crashed against the bed frame.

She had to hurry. She didn't know what else was waiting for her on the other side of that door or who might appear to open it. There was no diary behind the shelf. She overturned the second bookcase with reckless abandon, letting it crash hard against the floor. Still, she found no diary waiting.

Panic set in. What if Nana Rose had found it years ago and moved it? What if the evil witches had found it? But, what if Cleo had simply forgotten where it was?

Hoping for the latter, Sandra started opening dresser drawers.

The snarling and scratching continued and it wasn't long before the beast had managed to scratch a hole right through the old wooden door. Its swirling red eyes stared her down as drool and foam frothed at its teeth.

Sandra swirled around, searching the room. She hurried to Aunt Cleo's childhood desk, opening one drawer after another, throwing papers and pencils. Just as her eyes set themselves upon a small book with a brass lock the door splintered and busted open. The dog tore through the room toward Sandra who moved faster than she thought she could. She hopped over the bookcases, flung open a closet door, and slammed it shut in the dog's face.

There was no time to waste. Doors were hardly an obstacle for a ravenous beast like this one. She swirled her wrist like she'd seen Lindsay do a hundred times before. Nothing.

She tried again. But still nothing.

Beads of sweat rolled down her forehead, stinging her eyes.

"Just stay calm. You can do this," she urged herself. But the blood in her veins was pumping so loudly she could hear it. "Focus."

She turned her hand more slowly, this time, and a sparkle of green light wooshed open a portal in front of her just as the dog busted the door from its hinge. The door crashed into Sandra, pushing her through the portal.

CURTIS + LINDSAY

"It's a shame you've made it this far," a shrill voice cut through the silence from a few meters behind.

Curtis didn't need to turn to know who it was. It was the same voice that had lulled him to sleep as a child; the same voice that soothed him when he was sad.

"It would almost hurt me to stop you, now." Their fake mother let out a cackling laugh. "Well, it would if I had any feelings for you, whatsoever."

She nodded to her sister who swiftly dashed backward on the pathway, disappearing into a white haze.

Lindsay firmed her stance, ready for attack at any moment.

"You know," Curtis said, puffing his chest as he met the evil witch's eyes in the distance, "you are the absolute poster of a bad a witch and the very reason the rest of us can't let our truth be known in the world."

A devilish grin spread from cheek to cheek as she relished in his words. "The absolute poster?" She clutched a dramatic hand to her chest. "Why, my boy, you do flatter me. It's too bad I haven't been able to locate your aunty to trade for my dear sister's place in your realm. I actually *do* almost hate to banish your soul here for eternity, instead."

"Then take mine," Lindsay demanded as she pushed her brother behind her. "Banish my soul here for eternity and let Curtis go."

The evil witch only laughed more at this request. "You can't think I'd possibly do you that favor, child. I know you're hoping to find your little friend in here."

Lindsay gasped at the mention of Peggy Sue.

The evil witch scoffed. "Don't act so surprised. I know a great many things. The words that brought me to life might have been from before your time but magic is magic, after all, and it appears I know just as much about you as your own mother."

A shuffling noise emerged from an open portal behind her as Aunt Cleo's double pulled the real Mrs. Loveless into view. Her body laid limp on the dirt pathway.

Lindsay started to leap into action, ready to run for her mother, but Curtis threw up a hand in front of her, holding her back.

"She's OK," he whispered.

Lindsay's eyes searched his face for reasoning. How could he know she was OK? She didn't look OK.

He just nodded, reassuring her.

The evil witch lifted her chin and straightened her back. "Now, if you'll so kindly stay still, I'd like to finish this, once and for all."

She stared straight at Curtis as she lifted her left hand, palm up, in front of her. Her right arm, revealing the same opal amulet she used to cast him into the cosmos.

Lindsay's mind was caught on her mother's body - the stillness of it. And the fact that her mother had somehow known about Peggy Sue. So caught up that she didn't realize that her mother's double had drank a potion and started reciting a spell.

"No!" she cried, hoping to distract the evil witch. But it was to no avail. A howling wind picked up around them as purple and white swirls of light started twirling around the amulet.

The evil witch did not falter. Her voice steady; her words clear, she continued her spell.

Frantically, Lindsay spun a portal. She needed to get her hands on that amulet. Intending to pop herself up beside the evil witch and knock her off her balance, Lindsay jumped through the portal's shimmering light before her brother could warn her.

"Lind-" his voice cut off behind her as she tumbled out of the portal into her own living room.

"Ha!" Fake Aunt Cleo laughed as she watched Lindsay disappear from view. "Guess someone didn't know how things work around here." A bubbling laughter overtook her as she stood, confidently, behind her sister.

Curtis lunged at his mother's double. He had no idea how to fight or what to do but assured himself he'd land at least one punch and figure the rest out later. Five paces forward, he felt something grab his ankle from behind and pull his leg out from under him. His face smashed, hard, against the dirt path, collecting tiny stones into his skin as the invisible foe dragged him backwards and lifted him into the air.

The world spun, for a moment. A loud ringing sound whooshed in his ears, blotting out everything else. And in that moment, Curtis wasn't disoriented, as he would have expected. He was of his clearest mind. Blocking out the world around him was just what he needed to remember the new gift he held. He let his mind quiet and settle as he listened to a voiceless knowing that stirred within him.

He opened his eyes, watching as the evil witch chanted her incantation. The swirling purple and white smoke had grown to envelop her, almost obscuring her from sight. Aunt Cleo's

double still stood, at a distance, behind her, holding down his mother's lifeless body with her boot.

He used all his strength to bend at the waist, pulling himself up to grab the vine which held him clutched to the side of a tree. With his free hand, he wrapped his fingers around the obsidian amulet he wore around his neck and held tight with the other as the vine released its grip.

Slowly, he lowered himself down, aware that the evil witches had been too caught up in their own scheme to even notice him.

"What? But, *how*?"

Curtis smiled. "Turns out you missed one of the most powerful amulets of all - the one that banishes evil magic." He tapped the back gemstone on his necklace.

SANDRA

She poured herself through the portal and spilled out onto the floor of the Loveless living room, the beast hot on her heels.

Aunt Cleo stood at the other side, ready and waiting. She swirled her wrist and snapped the portal closed the moment Sandra's feet were clear, locking the hound inside. An expression of regret flashed across her face as she watched the dog disappear from view.

"I'm so sorry, kid," Cleo soothed, rubbing Sandra's back. "I never figured the evil copies would charm mom's dog."

Sandra sat up and leaned her back against the sofa, still catching her breath. Curtis's elbow grazed her back and, suddenly, Sandra wasn't afraid. She was proud. She hadn't just done something scary. She had done it to save a friend. And possibly her girlfriend. A new pain struck her heart as she wondered where Lindsay was.

"OK," Sandra said, pulling herself to her feet. "What now?"

Aunt Cleo bit her lip and shifted her eyes. "Well, sorry kid but I really don't know. Like I said mom sent me some letters talking about some things that might happen but they were pretty vague. All she really said was to let you kids figure it out for yourselves."

"That's it!" Sandra pulled a small book from her back pocket. "Nana Rose left this for me. She said we'd each have a book with a message in it. But mine just said to read it later. In its entirety."

"Sure hope you're a fast reader, kid," Cleo shifted a look to Mr. Loveless who was hopeless petting his son's hair.

As Sandra opened the book she noticed something she hadn't before. It wasn't as heavy as a book should be. She flipped through the pages and quickly discovered that the book had been hollowed out and an opal amulet had been hidden inside.

Cleo drew in a quick breath. “A cosmos amulet,” she said, in awe. “I had forgotten all about these. This must be how to doubles - ”

“And it’s how I’ll get to Curtis,” Sandra interjected. Her confidence wavered. “Um, but how do I use it?”

“Just hold it while you cast a portal and keep your intention clear. Try to focus on Curtis so you find him in there because otherwise...” she took in a deep breath. “People have been lost in the cosmos, before.”

Sandra wondered if that was what had happened to Peggy Sue Whittacker - the girl that Lindsay and Curtis hated to speak about. But she kept her wondering to herself and set her mind to the task at hand.

CURTIS + SANDRA

Curtis had halted the evil witch in her plans but the stone wasn’t powerful enough to stop her altogether. She flicked her wrist and sent another vine skidding across the dirt toward Curtis. He dodged it, tripped over his foot and fell hard onto a pile of rocks.

Proud of herself, his mother’s double took pleasure in pointing out that the rocks hadn’t been there mere moments before.

While she distracted herself explaining how wonderfully magical she was, Sandra appeared just behind her and pushed her off her balance before running to Curtis’s side.

The evil witch dusted herself off and tossed a narrow-eyed scowl at her sister who simply stood beside Mrs. Loveless’s soft breathing body.

“Do something!” she screeched.

But fake Aunt Cleo did not choose to help. Instead, she chose to sit beside the real life version of her sister.

“I’ve had it,” she complained. “I can’t keep this up. These kids - they’re just kids. Their world is so bright and these cosmos are so...” she looked around at the misty world that shook and quivered in her view. “They’re so strange. I just want to go home.”

Fake Mrs. Loveless huffed and turned with a jerk. “I suppose I have to do everything myself. As usual,” she complained.

But as she turned to throw magical force in Sandra and Curtis’s direction she found they’d disappeared.

They didn’t have much time. Curtis had cast a portal only feet behind his mother’s evil doppelganger, hoping to buy them time in her confusion.

Sandra produced the diary and Curtis immediately tore it to shreds. But nothing changed.

“Ha!” the witch cried, discovering their spoiled plan. She clicked her tongue. “You can’t defeat me by simply ripping up a diary. Fools.”

“No, you can’t,” Lindsay’s voice called from behind her.

The witch turned in time to see only a fading shimmer of light.

“But,” Lindsay continued, now appearing beside her brother. “We can with fire.” She quickly recited the incantation she’d tried in the catacombs and found that her magic worked just fine in the cosmos. A flame flickered to life her palm.

Before the witch could spring into action, Lindsay threw the flame at the book and watched as the witch and her sister evaporated into a puff of smoke.

Curtis drew in a sharp breath, suddenly aware that he’d been holding it since his sister’s arrival.

“Wow. Talk about timing,” he panted.

Sandra threw an arm around Lindsay, pulling her in for a kiss.

“You always have to be the one to save the day, don’t you?” She joked as she pulled away.

“I think it’s safe to say we all had a part in this one.” She nodded at Curtis who smiled in return.

Curtis lifted their mother from the ground and hoisted her over his shoulder.

“Look who’s Mr. Strongman in the cosmos,” Lindsay joked.

“Guess the laws of gravity are different here, too,” Sandra joined.

Curtis shrugged. They were right. “Let’s get Nana and go home.”

The three followed the sound of Nana Rose’s song in Curtis’s mind straight to the cosmos version of Loveless Letters. Nana Rose was slumped in her pile of books, awaiting their return in a peaceful slumber.

“Allow me.” Sandra smiled with pride as she lifted the cosmos amulet, twisted her wrist and spun open a portal that looked directly into the Loveless living room.

Curtis saw himself on the sofa and shivered. “Well, that’s weird, huh?” He chuckled. “OK, here we go.” Curtis gently rolled his mother and then Nana Rose through the portal and glanced over his shoulder before stepping through, himself.

But Lindsay and Sandra didn’t see him walk through on the other side. Instead, they watched as he awoke on the sofa, unbeknownst to Mr. Loveless and Aunt Cleo who were otherwise occupied with the arrival of Mrs. Loveless and Nana Rose.

THE LOVELESS FAMILY (AND SANDRA)

Nana Rose gulped a deep breath of air the moment she rolled through the portal. Her return to the real world stirred her back to life.

But Mrs. Loveless didn’t rouse.

Sandra and Lindsay arrived through the portal to a room filled with panic and confusion.

“Why isn’t she waking up, Cleo?” Mr. Loveless shouted.

“I don’t know, Larry,” she tried to respond calmly but her own panic was clear. She knelt beside her sister and her mother passing her glances between them.

“It was the doubles,” Nana Rose said, her voice hoarse.

“I know it was, Mom. But what do we do? Do you have a spell? A reversal? An amulet? A charm? Anything?”

Nana Rose breathed slowly. “I have one spell,” she said. Before Cleo could ask much more, she began to recite it. And as Cleo listened to the words, her expression grew even more grim.

“What is it?” Curtis asked, rising from the sofa.

“She’s trading her life,” Cleo explained, not moving her eyes from her mother. She didn’t want to allow her mother to do it, but she knew there were no other options and she wouldn’t stand a chance to protest.

As she completed the spell, Nana Rose’s breath slowed even more.

Mrs. Loveless stirred to life, unaware of everything that had happened.

“The last thing I knew,” she explained, “I was helping Mom with some paperwork. And now…”

“I’m so sorry, my dears,” Nana Rose said, shifting so that her back could rest against the front of the couch. “It’s really all my fault that this all happened. And to think you were all in such mortal danger.” Tears rolled gently down Nana Rose’s cheeks as the weight of the day sunk into her bones. “I knew it was coming, though I didn’t know why or how or exactly how bad it would be. And I thought that it was just going to be a small thing for the kids to learn from.

“I didn’t know that it would be copies from your dairy,” she said, turning to Aunt Cleo. “Or that they would be so powerful. Or that they’d nearly gather enough power to undo hundreds of years of work.”

“It’s really not your fault, Mom,” Mrs. Loveless started, but Nana Rose refused to be comforted.

“No,” she said. “It is. I was entrusted with caring for the family relics and I failed. I shouldn’t have tried to keep all of those things, myself, after your aunt passed on. I should have trusted you girls when you came of age. I should have told you the whole truth of who you are. Of what you are. Of what you can do.”

She shook her head as she looked at her lap, in shame. “We’re not just some witches with some powers and the very neat ability to hop portals, my dears.”

Mrs. Loveless and Aunt Cleo took cross-legged seats on the carpet in front of their mother, settling in for the story that she should have told them when they were just kids.

“Our family has a rich history in the cosmic arts. No one quite knows how it works, but we draw our power from the cosmos, themselves. Not the stars in the sky or the galaxies. The tiny cosmos that live deep inside everything, everyone. Every planet; every plant. Every tree; every rock. Every cell; every molecule. Every atom. That cosmic essence of what it means to exist.

We aren't the only family with a cosmic lineage, either. I might have let you girls think we were kind of flying to our own drum."

Lindsay elbowed her brother as he snickered at Nana Rose's metaphor fumble.

"How many others are there?" Mrs. Loveless asked, ignoring her mother's faux pas.

"I know of five others, at present. I remember a time when there were seven of us, in total, but there was a terrible tragedy and the Barrington lineage was wiped out, entirely," she let out a deep sigh and paused a moment before switching to a more upbeat tone. "And," she carried on, "sometimes new lineages pop up, though, and no one quite knows *why* one family member might develop a magical ability that had never before been seen in that line. But," she let her eyes move to Sandra, "I'm beginning to suspect it has something to do with love."

"OK, so there are six of us families, right now," Aunt Cleo refocused. "And are they all here in North America or are they in England?" she let her voice trail off, waiting for her mother to fill the void.

"All over the world, my dear," she said, floating her hands up into the air. "Legend has it that there was a time, far back in history, when our families were scattered around the globe - tasked with keeping peace and harmony. But power can corrupt and being born a witch does not mean being born a saint.

"A wicked witch once killed her own family to gather their power for herself. She charmed armies of men to fight for her as she sought to rule the world. The other families came together, pooling their resources but they weren't enough for a quick and swift triumph, because the families of light and love refused to charm unwilling men and women to fight on their behalf. It was a decades-long war but it was finally won by the side of light and love."

Nana Rose quieted and held her hand over her heart for a moment of respect.

"That's when things changed," she said. "That's when every family agreed that they would not practice the full extent of their power. Each family locked away about 80% of their spellbooks and amulets, swearing never to use them, again. Each generation saw a guardian entrusted to watch over those relics, only to bring them forward in times of great upheaval in our world. In exchange for the honor of knowing the secret codes to unlock their locations, this special guardian was stripped of her magic, so that she could not go mad with power."

Shocked looks filled the room.

"But, wait" Lindsay started, "you *have* power, Nana. How could - ?"

Nana Rose nodded. "I wasn't the original keeper. That was my sister Ruth. When she died the girls were just young. How could I choose which of my daughters would bear such a curse?" She looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. "So, Ruth agreed to give me the codes, even though it broke the ancient laws. And I was supposed to safeguard the secrets until I felt it was time to burden one of you." She turned her attention to her daughters.

"But I could never bring myself to do it. And as I grew older and sicker..." Her lip began to tremble. "I'm so sorry. If I'd have just done my duty none of this would have happened."

Mrs. Loveless and Aunt Cleo sprang to their feet, rushing to their mother's side.

"It's OK, Mom," Mrs. Loveless soothed.

"Everyone is fine. We are all OK."

"I know. I know," Nana Rose dismissed. "But it came really close. A lot closer than any of the shenanigans you girls got into as children. Or you lot," she turned her attention to Lindsay, Curtis and Sandra who all responded by looking squarely at their feet.

"It's OK, Mom," Mrs. Loveless repeated. She pulled her mother into her embrace.

A silence fell over the room as they embraced. That is, until Curtis couldn't handle the seriousness any longer.

"Well, I'm hungry," he proclaimed, rubbing his stomach. "Who wants pizza?"

For all the growing up he'd managed to do in the past few hours, Curtis was still, well, Curtis.

The room stirred with laughter and the rolling of eyes as Mr. Loveless fetched a pizza menu from a drawer in the kitchen.

"So, how did you know about the doppelgangers, though?" Lindsay asked Nana Rose. "I mean, you left us each a book - a very specific book, I might add."

Nana Rose smirked.

"And you left us notes. And it all laid out what we needed to do," Lindsay finished.

"Well, you could have been more specific," Curtis threw in.

Nana Rose let a soft laugh escape her. "If I'd been too specific and the doubles found the letters they would have caught on. Besides, I'm sure you kids learned a lot along the way." She wiped her hands on her skirt as though finishing baking a delicate cake. "As for how I knew, well, sometimes you just know."

Curtis couldn't help but laugh. It seemed a burden he could now call his own.

"And the rat with the pocket watch," Lindsay added. "Couldn't find a rabbit?"

"A rabbit couldn't stand to live in the catacombs as long as that rat managed. I was able to open a tiny portal to the cosmos just for you, charm that rat to repeat a pattern of steps and not to gnaw off his pocket watch but, as you know, we can't interfere with the plans of death. A rat was my safest bet. Besides, I think you followed that little inside joke better than you might have followed a simple white rabbit." She winked at Lindsay who couldn't help but smile in return.

"How long was the rat down there?" Sandra questioned. "How long ago did you foresee this?"

Nana Rose tilted her head, straining to remember. "Well, child, that's the thing about visions. It's hard to put a time and a place to 'em - when they happen *and* when you try to remember them."

"I think the remembering thing might just be a *you* problem, mum," Cleo joked. But laughing only pained her as she watched her mother's skin grow paler.

Nana Rose cleared her throat, calling all attention in her direction.

"Well, kids, I suppose now is as good a time as any," she said.

Lindsay and Curtis gathered in front of her, cross-legged on the floor. This was always how she began storytime when they were kids. Stories about fantastical worlds with beasts of all shapes and sizes and the young girls who slayed them all in their dreams. Little did they know, at the time, that those girls were really their mother and their aunt and that no one was dreaming.

Nana Rose nodded at Sandra who stood, hesitant, behind Lindsay and Curtis. Sandra quickly moved forward and took a space on the floor beside Lindsay.

"I was saving these," she said, pulling three amulets from her pocket. "Originally, they were going to be hidden for you in the tiny library with amazingly fun riddles and treasure hunts for you to uncover them when I died. But," she drew in a rattling breath, "it seems the time has come a little sooner than expected. Go figure. Can't see the future as well as I thought, after all."

She passed a necklace to Lindsay. A deep red stone dangled from it, showing glints of gold when the light hit it just right. It was in the shape of a flame.

"This one is born of fire, much like you are. It is made of all things passionate - anger, love, vengeance, and righteousness. But a refined form of passion. It will help you channel that inner fire and use it for good."

Lindsay looped the necklace around her neck and watched as flames burst forth. They extinguished as fast as they appeared, leaving her smiling in wonder.

To Curtis, she passed a crystal clear amulet. "This will help to enhance your clairvoyant and clairsentient vision. But, be careful not to use it recklessly, dear boy."

Curtis couldn't help but shine a devilish grin in Nana Rose's direction as Lindsay passed the amulet along to him.

Nana Rose choked out a chuckle before moving on to Sandra, passing her a shining emerald amulet. "You, my dear, are grounded and pure of heart. This will connect you even more to the natural world."

She coughed as Sandra took the amulet. But she didn't dare stop talking. "You might not have even noticed, yet, but you already are more powerful than you've ever known. I made it so that when I pass on from this world, I also pass on my magic to you." She let her eyes dance among all three of them. "But since I was thrown out of this world before my time, it seems that some of that magic already began its transference." She looked straight at Curtis who's head had been spinning with new magic all day.

"Anyway, these amulets are not ancient. They aren't like the ones that your mother and Cleo will be holding for safe keeping. I made each of these for each of you. So long as you have

them, you will have a piece of my power with you. And when I pass, you will have even more. But your particular power was chosen by me, in tradition for our family.”

The room was silent between Nana Rose’s labored breaths.

“Take care of each other.”