

Luanne

As the bus pulled away and disappeared into the gloom, Luanne struggled to open her umbrella against the ever-present rain. The shelter gave little respite. The sides and roof had been vandalised at some point and it was nothing more than a shell now. Tape had been strung around it to warn those approaching of the sharp edges, and it fluttered and danced as the squall blew through. Cursing, she pushed the button on the handle again and shook it harder, until with a huff, the catch let go its stranglehold and the dark fabric billowed out. Sighing with relief, she buttoned up the rest of her coat and stepped out into the night.

She carefully scanned her surroundings as she walked quickly down the darkened streets. Occasionally a streetlamp would burn dimly, illuminating its environs, as pools of yellow punctuating the night, but these were few and far between. Most of them stood dark and lifeless, their bulbs broken or burnt out long ago. No-one bothered to fix them anymore. Luanne tried to avoid them where possible. Instead of the safety they seemed to offer, the light would draw attention to her presence and blind her eyes temporarily to the possible dangers beyond. Rather than risk it, she stuck close to the walls and alleys, listening out for voices signalling thieves or worse. Her bag was safely hidden inside her coat, giving the impression of an overweight, uninteresting target. Her dark, blonde hair was tucked up inside one of her Nana's old bobble hats and pulled down over her face, and her low heels were perfect in case she needed to sprint suddenly, although they were no protection against the puddles pooling across her path.

Tonight, she reached her street unmolested and turned into the mews, her muscles relaxing as she spied the familiar, dilapidated buildings. Here, at least, she was safe, despite the bodies lying across the pavement or leaning against the ancient walls, sheltered from the rain by makeshift tents. She barely gave them a glance as she passed by, well acquainted with their vacant stares and open mouths dribbling saliva, their noses packed tight with the white powder that enslaved them. Climbing up a few steps, she finally reached the large porch in front of her house and folded the umbrella, glad for the wide canopy that sheltered her from the rain. She whistled three short blasts before undoing her coat and pulling her bag in front of her. Movement from the buildings alerted her that the children had heard and were coming over.

"Hey, Lulu. Did you have a good day?" Drew asked as he ran up beside her, his dark eyes glancing at her bag. At almost thirteen years, he was the oldest and was in charge of the six surviving children in the mews.

"I did," Luanne said, knowing he wasn't asking about her long hours of work in the factory. "There's plenty tonight." She pulled out the stale cakes and bread and the two of them portioned them out.

"Lulu!" Hetty cried, as she ran over and wrapped her arms around Luanne's leg. The youngest of the children, she held a special spot in Luanne's heart. Hetty had never really known her own mother, who had only fallen pregnant after her twenty-fourth birthday. She had spent just a scant ten weeks with her daughter before Haze claimed her. Luanne didn't even know who the

father had been. Nana and Luanne had taken her in and looked after her until Nana had died. In many ways, Luanne thought of Hetty as her little sister, although she tried not to show any favouritism, especially in front of the other children.

“Have you been good for Drew?” she asked, placing a hand on Hetty’s head and stroking the blonde wisps out of her eyes.

“Uh-huh,” she answered, holding out her hand for her share.

As Luanne passed it over, she looked at Drew, who just shrugged. Luanne sighed inwardly. Hetty was a beautiful, sweet girl, but she had a stubborn streak and would often stamp her feet and refuse to do what she was told if ordered. Luanne resolved to speak to Drew quietly about using subtle persuasion instead of trying to demand her compliance.

“Can Raggy-Ann have one?” Hetty asked, holding up a threadbare cloth doll.

Luanne shook her head. “You know she has to share yours.”

Angel appeared next. With her fiery red hair and green eyes, and a penchant for mischief, she was nothing like the divine creatures Luanne had read about. She quickly looked over her shoulder. “Can we tell Rafe you came back with nothing?” she asked, a twinkle in her eye.

“No,” Luanne said firmly, although her mouth twitched as she handed over Angel’s portion.

“It was funny last time,” she muttered to herself.

“You’ll have to think of another way to annoy him,” Luanne said as Rafe ran across the street. He stopped in front of Angel and shook his head, sending drops of rain over her cake.

“Rafe!” Angel snapped, punching him in the arm. He ignored her.

“I’m starving,” he moaned as he grabbed his share and began cramming it into his mouth. At nine years of age, Rafe was perpetually hungry and complained loudly about it to anyone who would listen. Unfortunately, the only income they had now was Luanne’s wages, which didn’t stretch very far, so the children had to go without more often than not.

“You’re always starving,” Angel replied as she carefully broke off pieces of her cake and ate, closing her eyes as she savoured each bite.

Luanne was just going to ask about the last two children when she spotted them. Grace and Bibi were picking their way hand in hand across the small piece of waste ground in front of the houses, uncaring of the drizzle slowly soaking their clothes. Grace leaned close and said something to Bibi, who giggled, bringing a smile to Luanne’s face. Bibi was a timid girl who rarely spoke. When she did, you had to move in close to hear her. Recently, she had been plagued with recurring nightmares about dying and Luanne had been worried about her. Thankfully, Grace had taken her under her wing and the two were now inseparable.

“You’d better come and get your goodies before Rafe takes them,” Luanne shouted. Grace shrieked and the two of them ran over.

“A whole cake just for me?” Grace asked breathlessly, her brown eyes wide.

“Just for you,” Luanne affirmed, handing it over.

Bibi took her share and watched Grace carefully, mimicking her every move as they enjoyed their treat. Luanne smiled to herself as they both licked their lips.

"I had one as well!" Hetty exclaimed, a big grin on her face.

Luanne laughed. "Yes, you did."

"One, two, three, four, five, six cakes!"

"Well done, Hetty. What if I have one in here for Mama G? How many does that make?"

"Seven," Hetty declared with a grin.

"Six," Rafe said gloomily. "Mine's gone."

Luanne ruffled his dark brown hair and smiled fondly down at him. "Mama G will have something for you tomorrow."

"But that's ages away," he complained.

"I know. I'm sorry I couldn't get more."

"It's okay," Drew said kindly, while glaring at Rafe. "We know you do your best."

"Sorry, Lulu. I am grateful," Rafe said, looking at his feet.

"There's always tomorrow night," she said. "Now, who wants to take this to Mama G?"

"Me!" Hetty replied, holding out her hands for the remaining cake.

"Mind you don't get it wet," Luanne warned, "and don't stay outside too long. The rain is going to be around for a while, and I don't want you catching another cold."

"Come on Hetty, I'll take you," Drew said.

"No! I'll do it myself," Hetty replied with a pout before running down the steps and out into the street. Drew sighed.

"Thanks, Lulu," Angel said with a grin. "That was yummy." The rest of the children raced back to the insubstantial shelter of the dilapidated buildings to continue playing in the ruins, but Drew lingered, kicking the top step with his hands in his pockets.

Deliberately pushing images of a warm fire away, Luanne turned her attention to him. "What's wrong?"

"She won't listen to me," he grumbled. "None of them do."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "I know it's hard. They've been used to having someone much older around all the time and they just see you as being one of them instead of a leader. They'll come around."

"The others might, but Hetty hates me."

"She doesn't hate you," Luanne soothed. "She just needs a little careful handling. Pay attention to how Mama G talks to her, and you'll see what she needs."

"She says I'm mean."

Luanne sighed. "I'll talk to her later," she said, reaching inside her pocket for her keys. "Right now, I need a wash and something to eat."

"Sorry," Drew said.

"That's okay. I'll see you tomorrow." Drew nodded before trudging down the steps and into the night.

Luanne turned to face her front door, ignoring the familiar body slumped off to one side. Matteo always came here, as if he still wanted to be as close to her as possible. Despite only recently succumbing to Haze, his face was already thinner, and his clothing was hanging off his frame. She noticed several rips in his shirt and made a mental note to hunt out some more of her grandfather's old clothes. Twisting the key in the lock, she pushed on the door, which had swollen with the perpetual damp. It finally gave way, the hinges squealing slightly. She needed to oil them again. Stepping inside, she locked and bolted the door behind her, finally laying a long metal bar across the whole thing.

Pulling off her heavy coat, she hung it on a nearby hook so it could drip on to the tiles, which were cracking because of the moisture. She didn't bother switching on the lights. It was a waste of energy and cost too much. Instead, she took a lantern from the table next to the door, and after lighting it, made her way across the hall to the long winding staircase opposite, not even glancing at the door to the basement, secured with four separate locks.

Once, this elegant townhouse had been the jewel of the magical community dwelling in the mews. Built and owned by her family for generations, on the death of her Nana, it had finally passed to Luanne, the only surviving heir of a great dynasty. In its prime, the house had seen dignitaries, politicians, even royalty enter its doors to attend parties, balls and soirees. Of the fifteen founding families, Luanne's kin were viewed as the leaders of the wizards, in addition to being protectors of the well, the source of their power. Now, the elegant clothes lay in trunks in the attic, sheets covered the remaining furniture, and the exalted visitors were long gone. Nearly all of their previous wealth had also disappeared, despite the efforts of her Nana, whether to pay for food or fund a habit, Luanne never knew.

She walked up the stairs past portraits of her ancestors, pausing near the top and lifting the lantern higher. It was the last picture painted in a time of opulence, when there was still hope for the future, and the terrible reality of Haze was a mere shadow. Standing at the back was a handsome but stern looking man with raven hair and silver-grey eyes. She had never known her great-grandfather. He had died long before she was born. Apparently, he had resisted Haze for a long time before falling into despair and giving in to the temptation. One hand rested on the shoulder of the woman sat in the plush chair. Luanne smiled sadly at her great-grandmother, Nana, so young and beautiful. Familiar eyes gazed lovingly at the baby in her lap, captured by the artist in faithful detail. With soft, blonde curls and innocent green eyes, her grandmother had taken after Nana and had been a gorgeous child, becoming an even more beautiful woman, a prize all the men vied for. Instead of aligning herself with one of the powerful families in the mews, Bonny had enchanted the youngest son of a baron who had married her without a thought. He had never understood the power of magic. He had even less tolerance for the drug that plagued the wizards after the magic had gone, abandoning his wife and young son to their fate.

Luanne sighed. There were no pictures of her father and mother, and her own recollections were hazy at best. Instead, Nana had been the constant in her life, loving and guiding her until the

very end. How she had resisted the lure of Haze, Luanne didn't know, but resist it she did, growing old and watching erstwhile friends and family succumbed to the drug.

Her eyes flicked to the little boy standing next to his father, completing the family picture. Her great-uncle, who had followed in his father's footsteps. Nana had rarely spoken of her family. Luanne assumed the memory was too painful for her, having watched her children die before their time.

When he reached his majority, he had been lost, as had every other child since the well had dried up. She shook her head sadly. Twenty-five years. That was all they had before their life was over. When she had been a child, it had felt as if she had forever, but now the days were sliding by so quickly she could see the end looming ever closer, like a dark cloud hovering on the horizon. She took a deep breath and deliberately pushed the depressing thoughts from her mind. She mustn't think about it.

Lowering the lantern, Luanne climbed the last steps and moved down the hallway. Since her Nana's death three years earlier, Luanne had shut up all the other rooms in the house, keeping only the larger drawing room for herself, both for convenience and to save money. Kicking off her shoes outside the parlour door, she pushed it open, luxuriating in the feel of the soft carpet under her feet. Padding over to the fire, she put a taper to the gas and switched it on, before moving the kettle on to the makeshift range to boil. As the room warmed up, she pulled off her hat, letting the long curls free, and went over to her store cupboard. Examining the cans, she chose a mince concoction, tipping it into a small saucepan and setting it next to the kettle to heat through. She pulled out a small loaf from her bag and cut off a slice. No butter this week. Perhaps she would treat herself after the next payday.

While she waited, she pulled the heavy, red curtains covering the tall windows aside and gazed out into the crescent. Occasionally, she would see lights in the other houses as the children played in the evenings before making their way back home to Mama G's. Tonight, however, all was dark. Only one light shone across and to the left of Luanne's house.

Mama G was the only person left alive who remembered the grand days of opulence before the magic dried up. She had been a friend of Nana's and between them they had cared for the children as, one by one, their parents succumbed to Haze. Now, while Luanne worked, Mama G organised the remaining children to look after the addicts, pouring water and broth into their mouths, washing their faces, and changing their clothes. Luanne preferred her role. As far as she was concerned, the bodies lying out in the street were nothing to her. Her friends had died the moment their infilling had come.

The whistle of the kettle interrupted her thoughts and, letting the curtain fall back, she busied herself with her evening routine. Some of the boiled water was used for a drink; the rest, she poured into a bowl to utilise for a strip wash. Wrapped in her Nana's old plush dressing gown, Luanne spooned the tasteless fare into her mouth, wiping the last of the gravy from the bowl with her bread. Afterwards, she picked up the book she had chosen from the library and tried to lose herself in another world, but after realising she had read the same page three times, she gave up. She could hear the rain pattering against the windowpane and sighed. Only then did she realise she was absently rubbing her fingers together. As soon as she looked down, the tingling registered. Highly sensitive to magic, Luanne knew when an infilling was due, even though her own birthday was still weeks away. The thought, which she tried to keep locked

away, escaped unbidden and the yawning emptiness of her future loomed even closer. An image of Matteo slumped beside her front door taunted her.

“I will not end up like them,” she vowed to herself, but deep in the secret places of her heart, she knew her life was almost over.

Jonta

My dearest Yugan,

I know it will be many years before you are able to read these letters, my last messages for you, but I want you to know how things came to be and why I must travel the road set before me. As I write, I can hear you in the room next to mine, gurgling in your mother's arms. Your birth is such a blessing in a world where all blessings have gone. I am taking it as a sign I have heard the Spirit aright, and what I intend to do will be the saving of us all, but most especially you, my precious granddaughter.

When I was a young boy, it seemed as if I had eternity before me, but now my hair has gone, my bones are weak, and my skin wrinkled. My time is almost over, but I intend to make it count.

Forgive me for the poor writing. My hand cannot grip the way it once did in my prime, and the tremors of age render me a poor scribe, but I will do my best because it is important to me that you understand.

My eyes still hurt, despite the gauze tied across them. The vivid orange sky burns them like the sun used to so very long ago. Your mother will never be able to tell you about the sun, because she has never seen it, but I remember. An orb of brilliant yellow that used to hang in the sky to mark the day. Then at night there were stars shining in a velvety blackness alongside the three moons. Kweechat, the singer. Sheehon, the precious light. Tiny Sitali, the star bringer, which only appeared when the harvest was ready to be gathered. Day and night. A time to work and play, and a time to rest. The months and years marked in the heavens for all to see. As I near my end, it seems as if those memories are becoming much clearer to me.

I'm going to tell you about the time before the scourging of the sky.

There is a colour called blue. How can I describe it to you? It is cool and peaceful, easy on the eyes and beautiful to behold. It soothes rather than burns. I remember how the colour changed in the sky from day to day. Sometimes it was a deep, dark blue draping heavily over the heavens. Other times it was a light powdery blue floating high up, always out of reach. In between was a swathe of tones and hues, all of them called blue, but all so very different. You could never get tired of seeing blue. Sometimes, the blue was obscured by clouds. Some of them were soft,

fluffy white ones, like woolly goats chasing each other across the sky. I used to lie on my back and watch them as they drifted over, trying to make pictures out of them. Other clouds were heavy and grey, stuffed full of rain that would fall on the earth to refresh it and bring life.

Rain, Yugan. Not the thrashing torrents of today that scar the land and flood the plains before disappearing for long periods of time. Do you know, I used to play in the rain? Yes, it's true! I would lift my face and let the drops fall on me. It was so refreshing to dance in the cooling drizzle. Sometimes the drops were so fine they were more like mist than a shower falling over me. And the taste. Sweet and cool, not the bitter warm dregs we have now. I can almost feel it flowing over my tongue and into my throat. We had so much water back then, Yugan. My mother would fill a tub with it so I could wash - a whole tub! No sand baths for me. I could drink as much as I wanted and even throw it away. I didn't know that one day the rivers would dry up and the water would become foul, or the colours would all be scrubbed away.

In my memories, I am surrounded by blue. The sky, the flowers, and the river, bubbling and dancing over the stones. It used to run outside the village, where the dunes begin now. I spent so many happy carefree days by that water, watching the clouds float by and paddling in the shallows. I used to climb trees, too. Oh, but you don't know what they are, either. How shall I describe them to you?

Luanne

Luanne sighed with relief and turned towards the locker room as the machines in the pharmaceutical factory fell silent for another day. The maintenance crew passed her as she hurried off, using the lull before the night shift began to repair the machines, oil them and check for problems. A few weeks past, someone had caught their hand in a dispensing machine and lost three fingers. The government inspectors had turned up and forced the factory to spend money on updating. The injured man lost his job, of course. Rumour had it, they had even docked his wages to compensate for the ruined batch, because of all the blood in the product.

Luanne hated her job. Every day she sat for hours scanning the conveyor belt in front of her for broken tablets before they were packaged up and sent for retail. It was mindless, boring, soul-numbing work, but it paid her enough to live on and look after the children. In a time when so many had nothing, she was grateful despite the tedium. Better that than the alternative.

She pulled her bag over her head and donned her coat, pocketing the few coins she had taken out of her box that morning. She followed the snaking trail of bodies out of the gates past the imposing security guards and made her way down the street towards the bus depot. As usual, she stopped at a row of shops huddled under the remains of a block of flats, pushing open the door to the bakery. She was greeted with a rush of warm air, redolent with the aromas of fresh bread and sweet cakes.

“Hey, Lulu,” a large, bald man in a white apron called as he turned to see who had entered.

“Hi, Herman,” she replied, and let her gaze feast on the variety of treats on show in the cabinets as he served his customer.

“How are you doing today?” he asked when the woman was finished, and he could give Luanne his attention.

“I’m good,” she replied automatically. She noticed many of the shelves were already bare.

“You’ve had a busy day.”

“Pretty much,” he said, rubbing his head. “It’s getting quieter now.”

“I’ll have a loaf,” she said, pointing behind him. He took the bread from the shelf and wrapped it in paper.

“I’ll get the rest,” he said and went out the back, returning with a small bag. “It’s not much,” he said apologetically. “Business has been good.”

“That’s okay, I appreciate everything you do for me,” Luanne replied as she handed over the coins from her pocket.

“How are those little monsters?”

“Keeping me on my toes,” she laughed. “Hetty has learnt her numbers and now counts everything. Rafe has a bottomless pit for a belly. I think he might be going through a growth spurt. Bibi and Grace have developed an interest in art and keep asking me if I can get some paints for them to have a go. They seem to think I can magic them out of thin air.” She shook her head and smiled sadly. “They don’t really have any idea how much luxuries like that cost.”

“Kids never do,” Herman said, leaning on the countertop. “What about Drew? Is he stepping up?”

Luanne shrugged. “He tries hard, but the children still look to me to tell them what to do.”

“Herman, where did you put the flour?” A high voice called from the back.

Herman shook his head. “In the cupboard, same as always,” he shouted back. “I swear, that woman would never be able to find her own head in a mirror,” he said quietly to Luanne.

She smiled. “Missy just wants your attention.”

“She has it!” Herman protested. “I can’t help it if I’m busy in here.”

“Hi, Lulu,” Missy said as she popped her head around the door leading to the kitchen at the back of the shop. Missy’s brown hair was streaked with grey, and lines radiated from her eyes and mouth, but when she smiled, which wasn’t often, her face lost the signs of ageing and her bright eyes shone with a youthful exuberance. Most people would think her sharp and cold, but Luanne knew better. While Herman approached life with languid ease, Missy carried the weight of responsibility on her shoulders and worried constantly. “Did Herman give you your cakes?”

“Of course I did,” Herman said, rolling his eyes comically at Luanne, who stifled a giggle. She held up the bag.

“Got it here,” she said.

“Good. Now, Herman, I need you to get another sack of flour from the cellar. We’re almost out.”

“Your wish is my command,” he said, bowing low. Missy tutted and huffed before disappearing again.

“She is such a slave driver,” Herman grouched, but Luanne knew his complaints were nothing but empty bluster. The couple adored one another. She glanced up at the clock on the wall and buttoned up her coat.

“I’d better go, or I’ll miss my bus. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye, Lulu. Give them a kiss from us,” Herman called with a wink as she left the shop. She waved at him through the grimy glass front and started to run. As she left the little row of shops

behind, she was plunged into darkness once more, the only light shining dully from the building further up the road. She breathed a sigh of relief as she entered the shelter of the depot and saw a queue still waiting to board the bus home. Taking her place, she used the time to tuck the paper bag of goodies into her satchel.

A burst of laughter had her twisting round as a rowdy group of youths entered the huge sheds, kicking a can across the dirty tarmac. She stiffened and took a step back, wishing the depot wasn't so open. She watched warily as they passed, knowing it would only take a slight movement to draw their attention. This time, the loud group was too focused on their own business to spare a glance at the waiting people. Even so, she only relaxed when they left through another entrance.

"About time," the man in front of her murmured, as the bus finally appeared. Luanne looked across at him. Despite his stern demeanour, she saw his eyes glancing agitatedly around the depot, and knew he was just as on edge as she was.

There was a minimal police presence here in the industrial sector, but they were pretty ineffectual, preferring to congregate in the less seedy parts rather than risk themselves in the depths of the gang territories. The factory employed guards, but they were usually on the payroll of one gang leader or another and followed their own agenda. Crime was rife, and justice had disappeared with the rise of the bosses controlling the different sectors. Luanne had soon learnt she could rely on no-one but herself.

Eventually, they had all boarded, and the bus pulled away into the night. Someone had written something crude in the dirt on the outside of the window, but through it, Luanne could see the endless dark grey clouds above. She missed most of the hours of daylight. She started work early and finished as night fell. But even when she did have a day off, the endless clouds meant it was just a brighter shade of grey outside.

Nana had told her all about what life was like before the magic went. They had spent hours in the library poring over pictures as she described the blue skies and warm sunshine. Luanne huddled inside her large coat, amusing herself by trying to imagine what it would have been like until the bus reached her stop and she was spewed out of its steamy cocoon into the cool night.

As soon as her feet hit the cracked pavement, the tingling began in her fingers, a sign that the magic was gathering nearby. She mentally calculated the days as she walked and realised this would be the last time the magic would leave her unscathed. Her twenty-fifth birthday was looming when the doors to the power would fling wide and her body would be primed, ready to fill itself to the brim. As soon as the next infilling arrived after that, she wouldn't be able to resist as the magic flooded into her.

Except, there would be no magic, or at least, not enough to make a difference. Instead of the glorious infilling of the past, she would suck up the scant trickle of energy that occasionally leaked into their world, giving her body a hit of pure power. Then it would eventually dissipate, and she would be left empty, craving for more. She would shake with the need to be replenished, her body crying out for the next infilling, but there would be only one other way of satisfying the hunger. She would take the path every other wizard had taken.

Haze.

As if the mere thought had summoned him, Ansel stepped in front of her, his menacing grin revealing cracked teeth shining in the reflected light of the nearby streetlight. She was never

sure if he led the gang that controlled this area of the city or was just one of the more senior enforcers. She winced as he loomed closer, his rank breath wafting across her face. Instinctively, she clutched her keys tightly in a fist, ready to strike out. Luanne wasn't a violent person, but Ansel filled her with loathing. She and Matteo had often fantasised about driving him from their lives for good. She glanced behind him to the two burly thugs who were never far from his side, mentally chiding herself for not paying attention to her surroundings.

"Lulu," he said with a leer as his eyes raked across her body.

"My name is Luanne," she replied through gritted teeth.

She stepped to one side and Ansel moved slightly, blocking her way forward with his body. "Not so fast," he said, stretching out his arm as if to ensnare her. She slapped it away.

"Move," she demanded.

"That's no way to talk to me, especially as we both know you'll be seeking me out soon enough." He opened his mouth and his tongue traced a path across his lips as he leered.

Luanne laughed shortly. "In your dreams," she muttered.

He tapped the tip of her nose with a nicotine-stained finger. "Don't you know it, my pet."

"I'm not your pet," she spat.

He grinned. "But you will be. Just like all the others. Oh, Ansel," he parroted in a high voice, "Just one hit. I'll give you anything. Just give me some release." His goons laughed.

She shuddered as he smacked his lips and grinned at her. She wanted to deny it, to protest she would never stoop so low, but she couldn't. "Get out of my way," she said instead, pushing past him and heading for home.

"I can't wait to have you grovelling at my feet, princess. Then we'll see how high and mighty you are." His laughter followed her as she rounded the corner.

As she glanced around, she could see why he was there. The usually motionless bodies were twitching in agitation as the last of the Haze began to fade from their cells. Soon they would be awake and clamouring for his product, desperate to trade whatever they could for their next fix. It was a dangerous time to be outside.

Luanne cursed to herself as she spotted the children gathered on her steps, their eyes wide as they watched the addicts grow more restless.

"What are you doing here?" Luanne chided, as she ran up to them. "You should be at Mama G's."

"We wanted to wait for you to come home," Rafe said quietly, glancing guiltily at Drew, who was standing red-faced, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Well, don't. Drew is in charge now. I can't be here for you all the time. If he says you should go, then you go."

Bibi whimpered and pressed closer to Grace as Matteo's body jerked suddenly. "Do you really want to be here when they wake up?" Luanne asked fiercely. The children shook their heads. "Then move."

She grabbed Hetty's hand and urged them across the street. Like Luanne's, Mama G's house was barred and boarded, as well as being warded by magic; a safe place for them to retreat to when the addicts woke up. She pulled the two youngest in front of her and felt them trembling. It was a fine line between keeping them ignorant of the depravity of the addicts whilst also protecting them. Maybe they needed a scare like this to make them more cautious in the future. Luanne knocked loudly on the faded red door and pushed the handle down while the children crowded around her.

"It's me, Mama G. I have the children," she shouted as she herded them inside.

"Bless you, chile," a honeyed voice called. Moments later, a tiny woman entered the large foyer.

The children liked to say that Mama G was older than the sky, but she was still sprightly and nimble, despite her age. Warm brown eyes shone from her mahogany face; the skin wrinkled with a myriad lines criss-crossing like an ancient map. Her once ebony hair was now white but was perfectly styled and offset with a bright yellow scarf. She was a diminutive woman, only reaching Luanne's shoulders, but she exuded an air of authority that demanded respect.

"In you come, precious ones," she said, ushering them in. The children raced past into the sanctuary of her home. Mama G looked behind Luanne and frowned. "Why are they so late?" she murmured.

Luanne shook her head as she opened her bag. "No time to explain now. Ask Drew; he'll tell you. Here," Luanne said, pulling the stale cakes out, as well as her fresh loaf.

"But that's your weekend treat," Mama G protested.

"You need it more than me," Luanne replied, stepping back. A low moan sounded nearby. "I have to go. I'll see you when it's quiet again."

Mama G lifted her hand. "You take care, now."

Luanne smiled and nodded. As she turned back to her own house, the door closed, and she heard the locks being secured. Satisfied the children were safe, she ran back home, swiftly moving inside and fastening her own doors.

Mama G had often tried to persuade her to join them all when the addicts rampaged, but Luanne always declined. She preferred to be in her own home, even though Nana was no longer with her. She felt strangely safe there. The lower levels were secure, and the addicts knew it would be pointless trying to get inside. Even so, once she shut and barred her door, she made a quick tour of the rooms downstairs, checking the shutters and windows were still tightly closed. Finally, she stood in front of the basement door. Four padlocks winked at her from the light of her lantern, teasing her with their secrets. She lifted one up and fingered it, tracing over the dials that refused to yield to her occasional endeavours to open them. They had remained locked for decades. Not even Nana had known the combinations.

"I told your Grandfather I didn't want to know," she had said to Luanne when asked about them. "He knew we had to do everything to protect the well, so it would remain untouched for those who would come after us. All I did was guide him."

"But what if we need to open it?" Luanne had asked.

"All will be revealed at the right time, and not a moment sooner. Don't you go worrying about it."

She smiled at the memory. Nana often seemed to talk in riddles.

It was her great-grandfather who had closed up the well room, as well as fitting the locks and bars protecting the lower levels, his last effort to protect his wife and two small children. On that last terrible day when he walked out for the last time, he had given Nana the keys to the house and left without a backward glance, the lure of Haze eventually proving to be too much. His secrets died with him.

Sighing, Luanne dropped her hand and trudged up the stairs to her room. With the addicts rousing, she should get some sleep while things were still relatively quiet. Deciding to leave her meal for later, she shucked off her clothes and climbed into bed. Unfortunately, sleep didn't come easily. Images of Drew fighting the addicts, Grace screaming and Bibi cowering beside her made Luanne toss and turn, no matter how many times she repeated that they were safe at Mama G's. Eventually, she succumbed, only to have the frightening images follow her into her dreams.