

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a man and a woman in a romantic embrace. The man, on the left, has long, dark, wavy hair and is shirtless, showing a muscular physique. He is looking towards the woman. The woman, on the right, has long, reddish-brown hair and is wearing a dark, strapless top with a red bra-like element. She has her hand on the man's shoulder. They are in a tent, with ropes and fabric visible around them. The lighting is soft and warm, with two lit candles providing the primary light source. One candle is on the left, and another is on the right, both with flames and melting wax. The overall color palette is dominated by warm tones like orange, yellow, and red, with some cooler tones like blue and purple in the shadows.

Wheel of the Year

BOOK ONE

The Mabon Feast

C.M. NASCOSTA

A CAMBRIC CREEK ROMANCE

The Mabon Feast

Wheel of the Year

C.M. Nascosta

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

THE MABON FEAST

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Written by C.M. Nascosta.

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[The Mabon Feast \(Wheel of the Year\)](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[FOLLOW C.M. NASCOSTA](#)

Dedicated to my OG Monster Bait Readers
— thank you for making all of this possible!
Stay Spooky!

Author's Note:

*If the cover wasn't enough of a tip-off, here's your
warning, friends:*

Here there be monsters.

*This is a single POV story, a large portion of which
takes place in the female main character's head.*

CWs:

*A spider-like main character. Arachnophobes, please
take care of yourself!*

*monster/human romance, size difference, non-human
anatomy*

September

High above the master bedroom of the once-grand old Victorian, on a tree-lined street in Oldtowne, the moon hung heavy and white. From her bed, Ladybug imagined the way it would cast its glow across the wide expanse of lawn, turning the tulip magnolias into snarling, grasping beasts; monsters traversing a shadowed sea. The leaves had already begun to drop, leaving patches of bare branch exposed to the moonlight, as if the beast was showing off its ribcage to advertise its hunger. To the left of the house, her mind's eye was able to envision Slade Manor squatting in the near distance like a malevolent brick toad, four stories of second empire ostentation. The moonlight would turn the long drive into a reaching arm and the gated entrance into jagged teeth, waiting to swallow up the unwary into its haunted darkness.

The house, for the moment at least, was still.

It was coming up on half a year now, she thought into the shadows of the room, that day she was cast out. She disliked using the term anniversary for such an ugly affair. She held space for anniversaries, days of remembrance and reverence and honor: the death days of her mother, gone since she was a small child, and for each of the aunts, leaving this plane of existence within months of each other only several years earlier. She celebrated the anniversary of the town's founding with the rest of Cambric Creek and observed the anniversary of the birth of the small cat who lived in her garden, refusing to be brought indoors. The anniversary of the moon's turn to darkness each month, and the sun's annual leaving and subsequent joyous returns. Anniversaries were for celebration, and *this* was not a memory worth celebrating. To give weight to such a day . . . Ladybug turned on her pillow to stare up at the ceiling, aggravated by how often her thoughts were turned by the approaching sabbath.

The moonlight filtered through the sheers at the bedroom windows — a waxing gibbous, not quite full, but enough to bathe the bedroom in its soft, silver-white glow, giving shape to the shadows lurking at the edges of the night. Several days more until a brilliant harvest moon would alight the sky, several days to think and to plan, to create her own quiet ritual,

to forget about the pitiable state of her solitary celebration on such a day of worship. She was able to press the loneliness aside most days, shoved into corners and tight spaces, pushed out of mind . . . but the full moon had a way of illuminating even the darkest crevices, putting all that the shadows concealed to light. But that was several days away, and she didn't need to think about how she would be alone as the moon rose over the valley rather than seated in a circle of sisters. She didn't need to think about her lonely Mabon feast. She needed to sleep.

Sleep does not come easy these days.

She was wide awake, as she had been each night for the better part of the last several weeks, her breath coming in small, quick puffs, and her pulse quick and thready. She ought to roll over and pull the sheet up over her head, blotting out what she knew would come next, the smell and the sounds that would make sleep an impossibility. Instead, she gripped the edges of the quilt, the one she'd made with the aunts that last summer they'd been here, that last summer of family, of normalcy. The quilt was another relic of the past in a house full of them, but still, she gripped the edges of the well-loved cotton and held her breath in the moonlit dark, waiting for the sounds to start.

The darkness does not disappoint.

A heavy thump and drag above her head made the ancient floorboards squeal and creak in protest, followed by the familiar scuttling sound — leg after leg after leg, moving over themselves with a speed that made her heart clench, heavier than they seemed only weeks ago. *Weeks!* She'd been taught to keep time with the moon since she was a small child, and the skill had aided her in tracking the odd sounds from the attic, beginning in late summer when the days were humid and balmy, and cicada's thrumming song each day gave way to the chorus of treefrogs and crickets at night.

The moon had been full the first time she'd heard the sounds, the first thump from above startling her awake, the night of that terrible storm. She'd had begun keeping track in earnest when the black moon returned and she'd sipped her

Deipnon wine at midnight beneath a pitch-dark sky, and now the full moon approached once more, a complete turn since she'd first heard the sounds and smelled that ancient wanting, and still she waited, listening in the dark.

The floorboards creaked, and she held her breath. The smell would come next: that cloying, heavy black musk that seemed to roll in beneath the door and in between the cracks in the walls, pressing her to the bed and seeping into her lungs until it filled her completely and she was left gasping. It was the smell of *need* and *want*, and it beseeched her through the air, licking up her legs beneath the bedclothes until she writhed, pained with her inability to give the darkness what it desired.

She wasn't sure how much longer it could go on, for the rising tension that the twilight brought each night seemed to be nearing a breaking point. A tangible heaviness filled every room in the house with its need, and the corresponding band behind her navel seemed to winch itself tighter and tighter with each passing night as she waited for *something*. She wished she knew how to address the noises, the restlessness and tension. The air in the house seemed to thrum with expectancy, and she was, after all, a giver. Ladybug wished she knew what to say, what to do, how to signal to the darkness beyond her door that she was willing to provide for its wants. . . Instead, she clutched her quilt a bit tighter and listened, the scrabbling pacing above her not quieting.



Four Months Earlier

May

The ad had run in the Cambric Creek Gazette for two weeks before Anzan had called.

Attic apartment for rent

Third floor of a single-family home in Oldtowne district

Separate entrance; kitchen & laundry included

Quiet house on a quiet street – Serious inquiries only

He was frail-looking, she noticed immediately from her vantage point on the other side of the screen. Frail and thin, as though the slightest breeze might send him scuttling into the wind like a handful of dried, crunchy leaves. The araneaen had backed down the steps after he'd rung the doorbell, vacating the wide front porch before she'd had a chance to reach the door, and the way he stood on the walkway before her with his head bowed seemed to be a gesture of deference. She'd never had an opportunity to know any araneaens, and what she'd always been told — that the secretive spider-folk were strong and lethal and kept to themselves — didn't match up with the subservient specimen who'd arrived on her doorstep, hunched beneath a tattered shawl, a worn carpetbag on the ground beside him.

“I'm here to see the apartment for rent. We spoke on the phone earlier . . .”

His voice was deep, pitched lower than she'd been expecting for such a frail-looking thing, but it wheezed with air, reminding her of an uncared-for accordion, its bellows punched through with holes, preventing the rich bass-baritone timbre from forming fully. Ladybug blushed, realizing she'd been staring from her place behind the threshold, and jolted forward to push open the door.

“Of-of course! Please, come in. Can I get you a glass of water? An-zan? Am I saying that right?”

Wincing internally at her obsequious tone, she watched as he hesitated before bending to gather his tattered bag. *Just calm down, don't give so much. Deep breath. Play it cool.* She huffed to herself, as if she'd ever actually understood what “playing it cool” meant. Her years in the junior coven had

been torturous. No matter how over-friendly and helpful she'd tried to be with the other young witches — fetching snacks for the whole table, letting them copy her potion notes, twisting herself into knots to fit in — all it had resulted in was her still being the last to be picked as a foraging partner, giggled at as she trailed on the edge of the group, and overlooked for offices and positions of power as she grew older. The would-be tenant ignored her awkward overtures, a bone-white arm shooting out from beneath the shawl to reach out for the banister, gripping it tightly. *Just settle down before you volunteer to do his laundry as a part of his lease.*

He would tower over her once they were on level ground, she realized with a gulp as he gingerly made his way up the porch steps, his numerous legs moving in a slow, measured rhythm. He'd have trouble with the steeply-pitched staircase leading to the attic at this rate. *It's going to take him ten minutes just to make it down every day. What if he falls? What if he trips over his own legs and falls all the way to the bottom?* The thought of someone else in the house as clumsy as herself might have been cheering if the ramifications didn't involve a dead or wounded araneaen laying in a crumpled head in her foyer, far too large for her to help alone.

“You'll have a key to the front door, but the attic also has a staircase that leads right down to the side door.” She stretched as she spoke, holding the door open as wide as she could until he arrived at the top step, one of his four hands reaching out, at last, to grab the edge before she toppled. His gaze had remained trained on the ground as he'd navigated the steps, and she hoped that meant he hadn't noticed the portico roof or the slightly uneven slope of the porch steps. The aunts had always had a running list of minor repairs the big house needed, tackling things one at a time, but since they'd been gone, it seemed as if the house were falling to pieces faster than it ever had done before. She was obliged to tip her head back as he entered the house, the foyer seeming over-crowded with his size. “Y-you can use this door, of course, but if you wanted to have a bit more privacy, the side staircase is separate from the main house.”

A silent nod was his only response.

Ladybug swallowed, waiting for him to say something, anything — a grunt of agreement, a mumbled show that he understood, but that silent nod was it. Realizing there would be no more conversation forthcoming, she turned up the staircase in the foyer leading up to the attic, keeping her own footsteps steady as the bottom step creaked, indicating he was following. *What if he dies up here? How will you be able to get him down? Will they need to come in with a crane?* Even though the araneaen was terribly unhealthy looking, he loomed over her like a mountain. Removing him from the house, were he to meet his untimely end in her attic, would be no easy feat.

“So a-are you new to town? I’ve lived here nearly my whole life, so if you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask.” When silence met her back, she plowed on, feeling obligated to fill the empty air, deciding to assume he was, in fact, new to the area. “There are some beautiful hiking trails in the Applethorpe Wood if you like being outdoors, it’s a part of the park system. Oh! If you’re at all interested in botany, the Applethorpe Manor is just amazing. Just acres and acres of orchards and rare plants and trees, and the gardens are just incredible. They have the oldest tulip poplar tree in the country, and what I wouldn’t give to have free pick of their medicinal garden! My great-great-grandmother, Flortencia Brackenbridge, she was good friends with Adeline Applethorpe and helped her plant the original section of that garden. Took plants from her very own collection, right here, just out back. I’d like to have a membership there someday.” She sighed wistfully, imagining the expansive lawns and dramatic topiaries of the manor house, wishing for the millionth time the “Friends of the Garden” subscription wasn’t a small fortune.

The only response was the creak of the steps to her babbling, and she gulped again. This araneaen probably didn’t give a fig about the medicinal gardens at the donated historical home.

“If-if you play sports, there’s a softball team now, the Cockatrices, and the Chimeras, only that’s for Ketterling. I heard we’re supposed to be starting a Grumsh’vargh team, but of course, that’s mostly for orcs . . .” She realized they’d

nearly reached the top of the landing, and that the silence of the foyer had followed them up the stairs. Her would-be tenant said nothing. *Of course he's not interested in sports, you absolute twit. Look at him, he might blow away on a windy afternoon!*

She'd never been very good at *people*.

The art of conversation had somehow been missed as she was taught how to brew elixirs for luck and love, salves for healing, and poisons for cursing. She neither sparkled nor entranced at dinner parties, and often found more in common with the household cat than she'd ever done with her fellows. It had been easier when the aunts were still alive, encouraging her studies and shielding her with personalities that filled every room of the house, even when no one was home. It hadn't mattered that the whole world was speaking with a subtext she couldn't quite grasp — herbs and powders communicated in a way she always understood, and the aunts filled the uncomfortable edges of the world with love. Great aunt Authricia, with her booming contralto voice and high crone status, and sweet Willow, her mother's twin, always so patient, always ready with a story to make her feel better after junior coven meets. She'd forgotten, ensconced as she'd been in the safe haven of the world they'd created in the four walls of this house, that *people* were an unnegotiable part of the world outside her doors. People made things complicated, and complications were something, Ladybug had decided, she could do without.

The big house had seemed emptier though, once she'd been cast out. A tenant might be the answer to more than one of her problems.

The attic apartment had already been shown to a talkative gryphon whose endless questions left her with a slight tension headache, and a tall, soft-spoken mothman with a serious air and slight stammer, brand new to the area, who, regrettably, decided the space was too small for his needs. When the mothman called her the same evening she'd shown him the apartment to decline, it had been a mighty blow and she'd just begun to despair when the whispery-voiced araneaen called.

Stop being ridiculous! No one cares that much about gardens but you. He doesn't care about gardening or Grumsh'vargh, and he's not going to die. He doesn't even look that old! Black with white markings, he might have been striking if he were a bit healthier. High, finely sculpted cheekbones and a strong chin seemed to be carved in alabaster, and his ebony eyelashes were impossibly long, she saw, glancing swiftly back. His human-looking upper body was bone-white from what she could see of his arms and face, and his hair, sparse as it was, the same black as his withered, segmented carapace. The spindly legs that held him didn't look strong enough to bear his slight weight, and she'd wondered if he'd make it up all three flights without needing to rest. *You can put a chair on the landing. It'll be fine.*

Despite his infirm appearance, the spider-like man's eyes, raising unexpectedly to meet hers when she didn't continue at the top of the staircase, were striking — unclouded and sharp, six glimmering obsidian orbs of varying size flanking two human-shaped eyes of vivid, cobalt blue. He seemed unhealthy and weak, far too thin, desperately in need of a hot fire and a good meal, but his eyes . . . his eyes made her shiver. Her foot raised, seeking the step it expected to find and coming down on nothing but the solid ground, much further away than anticipated. It shouldn't have been at all surprising, considering she'd reached the top of the landing, but she desperately hoped the arachnid took her odd little hop to be a particular custom of witches, and not the stumble that it was.

“There's a small kitchenette up here, but the space is rather limited . . . please don't ever hesitate to use the kitchen on the first floor.” Ladybug smiled as brightly as she was able, hoping her conversation handicap didn't bleed through her sales pitch as she showed him around the apartment. “There are two separate rooms of this main space, one for a bedroom and the other could be a home office or gym, or a game room . . .” She trailed off, realizing she'd needn't have worried about her conversation skills. He had not returned her beaming smile, only pulled the shawl around him a little tighter and surveyed the space silently. “There's also a full bath, but—but it

was designed for humans, so I-I don't know if that would be acceptab — ”

“I'm sure it will be fine,” he cut her off, speaking at last, the deep rasp of his voice raising the hairs on her neck. “This will do. How soon is it available?”

“Oh, well . . . the first of the June is just a few weeks away, and I was hoping to have a tenant ready to move in by then — ”

“I can pay,” he interrupted, cutting her off once more. “I can pay for the remaining days this month if I'm able to move in as soon as you'd permit. It would be . . . most appreciated.”

Ladybug blinked, taking in the huge araneaen in the attic's dim light, streaming in from a small window near the top of the peaked roof. Her assessment in the foyer had proved correct — he towered over her, even in his hunched state, seeming particularly outsized in the attic's smaller confines. The beams above their heads were exposed, the corners of the space dark and shadowed. The tiny kitchenette was serviceable if one never planned on making anything fancier than a one-pot meal, and the bathroom was a hasty add-on of Liliputian proportions. It was an undesirable living accommodation, she was forced to admit . . . but there was something desperate in his tone. *He has nowhere else to go.* As soon as the thought entered her mind, she knew it was true. That had to be it, had to be the reason he was so eager to call this dark, shadowed, poorly-appointed space home — and she was in no position to turn him away. *Don't go feeling sorry for him. He can move in right now if he wants, as long as he can pay.*

“An-zan . . . I *am* saying that properly, aren't I? I don't mean to cause offense if I'm not; I just want to be certain — ”

“Anzan,” he confirmed in that low, reedy voice. “And you?”

“Oh! I-I'm Ladybug. I mean — well, that's just a nick — Elizabeth is my actual name, Elizabeth Alice Amaranth Brackenbridge the third, but no one has ever actually called me that. I used to be Lilibet when I was just a baby, but then my aunts called me Ladybug when I came to live here and I've

been Ladybug ever since.” A dull fire heated her neck as she babbled, the space too tight beside him to be able to swing her foot up to her mouth effectively. *Shut up, shut up, shut up!* She was unused to giving her name to people, for no one ever really asked. The cashier at the Food Gryphon didn’t need her name to check her out, nor did the nice girl who sat at her favorite farm’s welcome table need it to point her in the direction of the monthly herb sale. She went out often enough, enjoyed the local shops and restaurants and festivals Cambric Creek regularly hosted — but she attended alone, as she did most things, and had little need to say her name aloud. “You—you can call me whatever you’d like, I suppose. And you can move in today if it would suit you. I’m very glad you responded to the ad, Anzan.”

There was an almost imperceptible drop of his shoulders beneath the shawl, a tiny slump of relief that assured her she’d made the right call. He’d followed her back down the steep staircase, his many legs moving with the same slow measuredness they’d displayed on the ascent, a relief when he made it back to the foyer without incident. He nodded soundlessly when she gave him the keyring possessing a key for both the front and side doors, obliging her to tip her head back again as she wondered which of his many eyes she was meant to look at, settling on the human-looking pair as he signed the lease in a spindly script.

She leaned heavily against the heavy storm door once he was gone, the foyer once more seeming spacious and bright, the original stained glass window above the first landing of the wide, walnut staircase spilling a rainbow of color across the hardwood floor. *It’s going to be fine. It’s all going to work out.*

Taking a tenant was the answer to her immediate problems, she was sure of it. The sagging roof, the sloped steps, the chimney crown . . . she’d be able to fix it all. Without the accreditation of the coven, the healthy list of clients she’d inherited along with the house had begun to fall away and once the gossip began to spread, she knew more would leave. There was money in the bank, of course, and Jack Hemming himself managed the family’s meager investment portfolio, but she was loath to begin dipping into

her inheritance now. *You'll wind up a pauper when you're eighty if you're not careful today.* Already, her list of orders for the month seemed shorter, and once word about what had happened got out . . .The giant Victorian had been the aunt's pride and joy and the envy of many a witch in the circle, and at least she'd still have that. This araneaen was the unlikely answer to her prayers.

The coven could keep their brooms and boiled babies.

She'd be just fine.

It wasn't until that evening that she remembered she ought to start locking the side hallway door, cutting off access into the lower floors from the outer staircase. *You can't be too careful, and he is a stranger, after all.* The edge of something under the door caught her eye, unusual with this being a rarely-used stairwell. An envelope sat on the other side of the threshold, too thick to slide beneath the jamb. Inside, she found it stuffed with bills, crisp and new, as if they'd been freshly printed. It took her counting it three different times, pausing to do the mental math and then rechecking herself, realizing that it accounted for the rest of the month, that same day included. She raised her eyes to the ceiling above her head, wondering if he had indeed moved in already. There'd been no commotion of movement on the steps all afternoon, no moving van in the street, no slowly measured creaking, no evidence of her new tenant at all. The giant old house, its dimly lit attic included, was silent.



June



That had been in the Spring, when the cherry blossoms lining Main Street were just dropping their blooms and Cambric Creek was gearing up for its Midsummer celebration.

Ladybug was determined to attend the community festival and the Litha celebration to follow; to give thanks to the Dark Mother and celebrate the Holly King's imminent return, to whirl in the bonfire's smoke with a crown of summer flowers temporarily taming her frizzy curls. She would drink cup after cup of the bright yellow concoction being stirred in several cauldrons around the community park, bright lemon, sweetened with honey, and eat her fill of sweets and savories dotted with a rainbow of green and red and orange garden vegetables, crowned with sugar-dusted flowers. A lovely celebration for a lovely time of year, a renewal of her observance of the sabbaths, putting the disastrous spring rituals well behind her, once and for all.

She'd not spotted Anzan at the Midsummer festival — not at the street fair or the parade or the outdoor Biergarten, nor did she see him at the Litha celebration that night. There had been no sign of her spidery tenant around the bonfire or at the night market, and although she had given serious thought to attending the skyclad ceremony under the stars, she'd gone home alone, not fancying the thought of being persuaded to practicing the Great Rite with a stranger in a field, not when the air hinted at rain.

She had no idea which goddess the mysterious araneaens acknowledged, she realized, walking home that night. *Perhaps you can ask him the next time you pass him on the stairs, try your hand at getting to know him.* It was a foolish thought, for she had never passed him on the stairs, not once since he'd moved in, had never come across his groceries in the cupboard she'd cleared for him in the kitchen, or saw him coming and going. He'd never had friends or family over that she'd seen,

and she'd never heard any amorous activities taking place above her head. She could almost be persuaded that the attic was empty, or that her fears had been confirmed and the poor thing had withered away to dust . . . but the rent was always paid on time, always a neat stack of fresh bills in a plain white envelop, left outside the side stairwell door. *He's not dead if he's paying the rent.*

Regardless of his silence, there was something comforting in the knowledge that the hunched, whispery-voiced araneaen was just above her head, even if he was an unseen presence. It had been just over a month since the day he'd signed the lease in his wispy, spindly handwriting; a month of knowing he was there, a month of her wondering what it was that he did, how he supported himself, if that tattered carpetbag had been stuffed with cash or if he was possibly running an illegal money-printing operation out of her attic. The latter didn't seem to be the case, as she'd never had a problem depositing his envelope of bills each month, and she was certain the snooty elf who was the bank manager at Cambric Creek First Union would have been all too happy to tell her, a lowly witch, that she was trying to foist counterfeit bills upon them and summon the police. She didn't know what Anzan did, nor what he ate, nor what goddess he worshipped, if it was a goddess at all, but she knew he was there, and it was nice. The big house felt less empty and she, in some small way, felt less alone.

She'd gone out once more that night, after returning from the Litha celebration, creeping out the back door as quietly as she could, entering the back garden and letting her robe drop to the flagstones before stepping gingerly into the grass to stand bare beneath the moon's soft glow. She disliked the noise and the sensory overload of the community fireworks and was glad she'd been indoors for that part of the night, her nose twitching at the smell still lingering in the air. It would most certainly rain that night, and the gathering clouds nearly blotted out the moon completely, but when they edged aside, allowing the white light to shine down, she turned her face up to it, eyes squeezed tightly shut, trapping her tears in her lashes.

The weight of everything that had transpired pressed her down with a bit more force each day, leaving her feeling smaller and more alone by the minute. She should have spoken up, should have argued, should have insisted on a hearing before the high council. She should have done *something*. Authricia would have roared back like a lion, and Willow would have cited the rules of old magic with her singular serenity until the High Crone had capitulated . . . but all she'd done was sputter.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the moon, to the Dark Mother, to the family tree of witches staring down at her broken branch in dismay. "I'm sorry I missed the sabbath. I'm sorry for everything." She'd spent the May Day Beltane celebration alone and sobbing into her bathwater, still reeling from all that had transpired, from the High Crone's words and her expulsion from the circle.

The high council cannot see how you can continue to be amongst our ranks. A witch who will not observe the sabbaths is not a witch at all. By refusing this, you are refusing our ways, and your position within this circle is forfeit. We have no choice but to cast you out.

Leaving the coven was hardly a punishment. It wasn't as if she would miss the meetings: conversations she'd hovered on the outskirts of, never really included; jokes at which she laughed a beat too late, stilted small talk. She could ignore the fact that she fit in nowhere, but being stripped of her only identity—cut off from her mother, the aunts, the grandmother she'd never known and all of the grandmothers who'd come before—was untenable. The weight of all she had lost felt as though it had been carved from her body, taking her heart along as well, leaving her hollow and empty and worthless. *Cast out*. She'd not just been cast out of the coven — a piece of her very existence had been cleaved away, the fabric connecting her to all whom she'd loved torn to shreds. What was she, if she wasn't a witch? That night had replayed in her mind a hundred thousand times since, a movie reel stuck on repeat that only she could see. Too shocked to speak in her own defense, she'd stood open-mouthed before the High Crone, struck mute by the untrue accusations, allowing herself

to be swept out — from the circle, from the coven, from existence — with nary a peep.

She'd realized with a sinking heart the next morning that by wallowing in her misery, she'd caused the High Crone's false words to ring with truth, for she'd not observed the sabbath, a mistake she'd not make again. They could strip her of title and push her from the coven, but *none* of that meant she wasn't a witch.

“It doesn't matter what they say. I'll practice alone, I'll not forget all that I've been taught. I'll not forget you. I'll . . . I'm sorry.” Her tears overflowed at last, running down her face as she stared up at the moon, the same moon she'd worshipped beneath her entire life, the same moon she'd stood under beside the aunts, the same moon her mother had danced beneath.

What am I, if I'm not a witch?

A shadow on the ground subsumed her own, startling her focus on the sky above, but when she whirled to face the house, there was no one there. Ladybug stared up at the small attic window and the dim light emanating from within for a long moment before turning away slowly. She wondered if Anzan knew it was a sabbath night; if he was aware of the community-wide Midsummer celebration. *He probably doesn't, not if he's new to everything here. You should have invited him.* Turning her focus back to the sky, she sighed to find the cloud cover completely blotting the moon's light, leaving her quite insensible to the figure at the attic window, its shadow non-existent in the dark grass, and continued her short ceremony before the rumble of thunder sent her scurrying to slip back into her robe and retreat safely indoors.



July

“Doesn’t that make you nervous, having a strange man in the house?! Who knows what he could get up to!”

Ladybug felt her cheeks heat at the troll’s words, being sure to stay still as the stylist laughed, combing through her wet hair as the harpy beneath the dryer clucking her tongue. She’d been coming to this mixed-species salon for years, liking the fact that it was within walking distance of all of her errands, and happy enough with the results produced by Zulya, the fast-talking troll who always cut her hair. The salon trips were an exercise in pretending — pretending she heard all the troll said, even though her fast patter seemed to short-circuit something in Ladybug’s brain. She watched Zulya’s mouth move in the mirror and heard her speaking, but her ear only processed every third or fourth word, leaving the bulk of the conversation as a white noise she could barely follow. She pretended to laugh at the jokes she’d not caught, nodded when the scissors were not a danger, and made the appropriate humming vocalizations to show she was listening. Zulya would initiate conversation with her as soon she was led from the shampoo station, but she was rarely given space to respond or feel comfortable, couldn’t keep up with the troll woman’s fast patter or bawdy laugh, never knowing if she was the butt of the joke being made. The stylist’s attention would quickly shift to other patrons, other employees, anyone but Ladybug, until she was a silent spectator, watching the action around her.

There was another salon in town, well outside the business district, set up in a retrofitted Victorian, that catered to werewolves and shifters. She’d heard the rumor that the stylist-owner had received her start-up funding from her best clientele, as Sandi Hemming and her daughter-in-law grew tired of having to make the trip into Bridgeton for the woman’s services, but if the Brackenbridge’s long association with the Hemmings had taught her nothing else, it was that the residents of Cambric Creek loved to gossip, and the founding family was their favorite subject. Ladybug never paid it any mind. Jack Hemming, aside from being the most handsome man she’d ever seen, was one of the few people who set her at ease, never making her feel odd. The two or three times a year she sat in his office to go over her finances was spent

chattering away — about his many sons, one of whom she'd known in school, the town's seasonal calendar, and the gossip from Oldetowne, which she shared giddily. She would ask after his wife Sandi and admire the framed photos of his young grandson at the edge of the desk, and he would update her on Trapp, her former schoolmate, and what country his son Lowell had been living in last, and she would relay the news that there was a new car coming and going from Slade Manor, a nurse for the aged inhabitant, perhaps. If she babbled, he interjected and joined her. If she was silent, he asked her questions about the house and about how business was faring, drawing her out in a way that didn't leave her tongue-tied and stammering. She would leave his Main Street office with flushed cheeks and a happy hum in her chest, having actually been an active participant in the conversation instead of feeling like it had taken place somewhere over her head, reminded that she was from an old family with deep community ties, reminded that she belonged. As a consequence, she seldom paid the town's gossip about the Hemmings any mind, other than agreeing with the widely-held opinion that Jack's oldest son Jackson would likely pick up the mayoral mantle that the family had held since the town's founding in the next election, "putting the shine back on the family name", according to his father.

That werewolf salon would probably be better suited to cut her hair, but they were always booked and completely new to her besides, and there was nothing that sent her nerves jangling like the prospect of brand new social settings, new people and new cliques, a new set of rules of which she'd never actually receive. A new gauntlet to run, and her running legs had about given up. She blinked in the mirror at the troll's exclamation, not having given much thought to the fact that a strange male was now sleeping beneath her roof.

"Oh, n-no. I suppose not. He's never done anything to make me nervous, he's actually very quiet. Keeps to himself."

"Sweetie, didn't anyone ever tell you it's the quiet ones you have to look for?"

Another burst of laughter, this time joined by the petite goblin who'd washed her hair. Ladybug forced out her own laughter, uncertain of what exactly the joke was. She'd been excited to have something to contribute to the conversation, announcing the news of her new tenant shortly after the cape had been wrapped around her neck and Zulya inquired what she'd been up to, but since then, the troll had made several comments Ladybug was certain were meant to be jokes, although she was uncertain of the target. The reaction of the other women in the salon had slowed her tongue, and she found herself holding back on describing Anzan's unusual species to her audience, feeling oddly protective every time they brayed in laughter, certain they were doing so at her — and maybe his — expense.

“Well I hope you've worked out a showering schedule,” the troll went on, chortling. “Although I suppose that's one way to become very well acquainted!”

Another joke, a rather crass one, she thought, stammering out that the attic apartment had its own bathroom facilities. When it was evident she didn't have anything salacious to disclose, the troll's attention wandered, turning first to the steel-haired harpy beneath the dryer and then to the new client being led to the shampoo bowl, and Ladybug went back to listening silently, as she did every other visit.

The brief conversation had given her pause as she made her way home. Anzan had never made her uncomfortable or fearful, even considering his great size difference. He'd remained as silent as ever, and as the days passed, she'd reconciled herself to the fact that he clearly had no desire to speak to her. Araneaens were considered dangerous, dangerous and secretive, and while the secretive soubriquet may have been fitting, he didn't seem especially dangerous to her, no more than the towering ogre who delivered her mail, or the fire chief, a barrel-chested orc with gold-tipped tusks. She never saw him coming or going, never saw him leaving for work or coming home with shopping bags, she'd never even seen him outside getting fresh air. Anzan's presence in the house was invisible and silent, but was still comforting, a slight balm on the disaster of the spring, and she was quite

content to continue on as they'd been, which was clearly his preference as well.

Her musings were challenged the instant she returned home. She'd not seen her little feline friend in some days, even though the food bowl she dutifully put out in the garden was always licked clean. Rounding into the garden, she stopped short with a gasp, not expecting to see the long, many-legged shadow of her tenant moving against the ground behind the garden shed.

"Anzan? Is-is that you?" she called out, realizing the shadow had gone utterly motionless. *You probably startled him.* She waited for him to come around from the shed, but no movement was forthcoming, and she was very nearly able to convince herself she'd simply imagined his shadow. "I-I'm just looking for my cat. Well, it's not *my* cat, she lives in the garden, but I take care of her. I haven't seen her in a few days . . ."

"The feline is prowling on the property to the left. She likes waiting for prey in the long grass beyond the trees.."

His voice had lost a bit of the reediness it had possessed in the Spring, stronger and deeper, causing a curious swoop low in her belly. *Doesn't that make you nervous, having a strange man in the house?* She imagined all of the reasons why someone in her position might be nervous to have a strange male in their home: footfalls outside her bedroom door, a near-stranger pressing a little too closely at the kitchen counter, the aforementioned shower disaster. Fire flooded her cheeks, envisioning herself wrapped in a towel that was far smaller than any she actually owned, flush against the hallway as the big araneaen pressed her to the corridor wall, his sparse dark hair dripping. She supposed the thought should have caused her distress, should have panicked her over the situation . . . but instead she took a step closer, ears heating. *There's a shower in the attic,* she reminded herself, and Anzan didn't come downstairs, never giving her cause to fret over him attempting something untoward. *Cause or opportunity?*

"I have watched her hunt, she's quite accomplished. She brings great honor to your name in her efforts."

His voice was serious and steadfast, without any hint of levity, and Ladybug smiled in response before wincing at his meaning, the image in her head of the araneaen squeezing past her barely-clad form being replaced with the less intriguing thought of the mangled bodies of songbirds littering the garden path, as they had last summer.

“A bit too much honor. I had to take down the bird feeders because it was giving her too much of an advantage.”

“Would you like me to bring her back for you? I’m happy to do anything you wish.”

It was the longest conversation they’d ever had, she realized, and still he lurked in the shadow of shed, not coming out to face her. The dark shape of him on the ground had dipped, and Ladybug remembered the way he’d lowered himself subserviently before her on the sidewalk the day he’d moved in. The notion of him being willing to go off tramping through the unkempt grass at the back of Slade Minor was alarming, for she didn’t want him to do himself an injury, but also for the riot of butterflies it set off in her chest. She’d never had a man of any species offer to do her bidding, and the idea of having one at her beck and call was rather appealing.

“No, it-it’s quite alright. I’m sure she prefers it over there, it’s a much nicer house.” Her stilted laughter cut off at his next words.

“Would you prefer to have that property?”

Ladybug blinked, her laughter dying at his serious tone. She briefly entertained the notion of her infirm tenant forcibly evicting Lettie Slade, the aged werecat next door, deciding he must have a very droll sense of humor that she didn’t understand. *After all, there’s precedent for that.*

“No, I quite like my house, it’s been in my family for ages. And besides, the Slade house is very haunted. I would always wear all of my banishing charms when we would attend the Halloween seance. I didn’t go last year, but I think this year I might . . . but I’m very happy with my own house.”

She wondered if Anzan might attend the annual seance at the Slade residence with her this year, if she was invited. She imagined walking him through the ceremony beforehand, explaining what to expect, gripping his hand tightly at the table as the spirits in the grand home weighed heavily on the room, poor old Lettie beseeching her departed Ezra to give her a sign that he was one of the shades roaming the halls, Anzan a silent, steadfast presence at her side . . . *Didn't anyone ever tell you it's the quiet ones you have to look for?* Ladybug shook away the ridiculous thoughts, as well as the voice of the hairstylist. *Was virtue even something that people fretted over? Surely not in this day and age?* Bodies were sacred, vessels for the life they carried, but there was no one act that was revered in the craft, not in the way she knew virginity was prized in other cultures—a silly thing, in her opinion, but in any case, it didn't matter. Anzan kept to himself. *And now he's outside trying to take a walk around the yard and you're bothering him.*

“Anyhow, I didn't mean to disturb you. It's such a nice afternoon . . . please enjoy your walk. If there's anything you need, I'm just a knock away!”

Heat suffused her face once more as she turned back to the house, cringing at her forced cheerful tone. Maybe she *would* try the werewolf-owned salon. They wouldn't put such ridiculous notions in her head, not the way Zulya had. She wondered if he even fit in the shower upstairs, if perhaps she *should* offer hers up. Cambric Creek was full of accommodative architecture, but she'd never seen anything specifically designed for araneaens, not that she'd ever seen another araneaen. *If there was an issue, he would have said something by now.* The notion of him randomly appearing in her work kitchen to offer assistance during her monthly skyclad observance made her cheeks heat as she crossed the flagstones, vowing to book at the new salon and hurrying indoors as if she might be able to lock the inappropriate thoughts outside. Ladybug was positive she felt the weight of half a dozen eyes on her as she hopped up the steps, certain he could hear her thoughts, would be able to see the impropriety stitched on her face, but she resisted the urge to look back,

locking her insensible thoughts in the garden. Continuing on as silent strangers was clearly his preference, and that suited her just fine.

Alone, together.



August

. . . Until the night of the storm.

- A late-August storm, which brought rain that pelted the windows and gusting winds that sent felled tree branches scattering across the block. The lights had flickered several times, and she decided it would be easier to retire early, rather than grope her way up the staircase in the dark in the event that the electricity went. She drifted to sleep to the soothing rumble of thunder, the lashing rain an odd lullaby as the streetlights went dark.

The clatter above her head was so startling that Ladybug yelped, sitting up in her bed with her heart pounding in her throat. She had no idea how much time had passed since her eyes closed, but the storm showed no signs of slowing. Holding her breath, she clutched at the sheets, listening in the dark. There weren't any trees close enough to the house to fall on the roof, but that didn't mean the storm hadn't sent something flying. A muffled thump made her gasp, followed by the sound of many legs, skittering across the floorboards, the creak of a piece of furniture. She let out the breath she'd been holding, sagging beneath her sheet. *It's only Anzan.* Normal, everyday signs of life from her tenant . . . but considering her tenant had been a completely silent presence for the previous four months, it was *anything* but normal. . . . *It's Anzan!*

Pulling herself out of bed, she followed the sound of the scuttling when it began again, moving down the hallway, past the empty bedroom and the room she used for her sewing supplies, into the bathroom at the end of the hall. The movement above her head paused before resuming, leading her back to the hall, back past the closed doors, past her own bedroom, continuing the short distance beyond the stairwell where she paused listening. Twice more she followed the circuit, realizing her seldom-heard tenant was pacing. She wondered if the storm had upset him in some way, or if — horrors! — the old roof had begun to leak. She certainly couldn't afford to replace any of his possessions that might be damaged and wondered if she ought to knock on the door leading up the attic steps . . . but Anzan never came down to

report any damage, and at length, she returned to her bed, the pacing above continuing.

The sounds at night did not stop after the storm, as she'd been expecting. Each night brought more of the same — a heavy drag, and the scuttling sound of legs moving back and forth across the floorboards. It was a heavier tread than she expected her frail, underfed tenant to possess, although, she considered, perhaps he wasn't as underfed anymore.

She'd been uncertain of her stew efforts as the pot simmered, weeks earlier, filling her kitchen with the rich, metallic tang of blood and vinegar. She'd filled the araneaen recipe with root vegetables that were more familiar to her, hoping he'd not mind her additions, in addition to the meat of the freshly slaughtered goose whose blood made up the broth, purchased from one of the local farms. She'd carefully carried the lidded pot up the side staircase, finding, to her surprise, a grocery delivery left on the landing, evidence that he *did*, in fact, eat.

The washed pot had been returned to her side door several days later, and she'd left it upon the countertop for another several, only finding the carefully wrapped seed pods inside when she went to put it away at last. Fragrant, smelling faintly of licorice and completely unfamiliar to her, she'd exclaimed in excitement, spending the rest of the evening pouring over websites and her vast collection of books until she found what exactly it was — an herbaceous plant whose roots were commonly used for cooking and medicinal purposes in a remote area of a faraway sea. He was very far from home, if that was from where he originally hailed, and the notion that he'd gifted her with something he'd brought with him in his journey to Cambric Creek made something inside her twist. It was unnecessary, for she'd not made the soup with the expectation of receiving something in return . . . but she decided to accept the seeds gracefully, planting them in one of her favorite pots, giving it a place of honor near her sunniest window.

The unexpected gifts had not stopped there. She'd come home to a seasonal flowering pot on the front steps a few

weeks later, rich red mums that invoked the approaching autumn weather, one that certainly hadn't been there when she'd left in the morning. The day she'd gone outside with her garden gloves to take care of the weeding, the same week she'd accosted his shadow after her salon trip, she'd found the task already done, with a brand-new pair of colorful gloves and matching knee pads resting on the countertop just inside the doorway of her small potting shed. Her next attempt at araneaen cuisine had yielded an unappetizing grey sludge, but that pot too had been summarily returned a few days later, a beautiful, shell-encrusted trinket box tucked inside. It was too much, too lovely a response to what was likely an inedible meal, but her timid knock on the attic door had yielded no response. Despite the loveliness of the box, it had been the corn dolly that brought her to tears.

Her Lughnasadh celebration had been a quiet, staid affair. The broom belonging to her mother, a brilliant golden ribbon from Authricia's altar, a green ribbon symbolizing her contribution to the first harvest. Mother, maiden, and crone. The absence of the aunts had felt like a gaping maw that sabbath, the absence of the circle, of the ancient ritual and belonging, and she'd made a poor showing with her corn dolly. The phone had been a shrill, insistent distraction; a client calling in a panic, asking what to put on a burn their child had received . . . and when she'd returned, nearly two hours later, the long corn husks had been rewoven. The small figure had a neatly defined head with two long plaited braids, an A-shaped dress and rounded nubs for hands, the exact sort of doll the skilled elders in the cover of her childhood had made. *Anzan*. Tears had blurred her vision and she'd sunk to her knees on the flagstones, the dark yard lit with flickering fireflies as she lit her candles. She knew he'd not answer if she knocked again, and ate her Lammás bread alone, grief for all she'd lost and gratitude for her silent tenant filling her heart until it overflowed, and she'd returned indoors overwhelmed with emotion.

She wondered, that sabbath night, if he was homesick, if he'd moved away for work or possibly school, if he'd left behind a wife or a family. She didn't especially like the idea,

but reminded herself for the millionth time that she was being ridiculous. She'd gone to bed that night with a cup of chamomile and lavender tea added to powdered valerian root and warmed milk, thinking of the corn dolly, certain she could feel the fingers of a dozen different hands, gently smoothing over her frizzy curls as her tears dried against the pillowcase.

But now the sounds at night had not ceased, and as days turned into weeks, the nocturnal activity only increased. She was loath to knock on the attic door again and certainly didn't want to cause offense, even though her nights were becoming as sleepless as his own. *Maybe he's actually nocturnal, did you ever think about that? You don't know the first thing about araneaens after all.* It was true, Ladybug rationalized. She knew next to nothing about the spider folk, even after attempting to learn more since Anzan's arrival. There was scant information on araneaen culture online, save for the numerous sites and articles that pointed out how secretive and insular they were, and for the first time, her expansive inherited library failed her. She was certain he *wasn't* nocturnal, but something about Autumn's arrival had set something off with her quiet tenant, and she had no idea what the reason for his constant pacing at night might be.

Just ignore it, she told herself, staring at the ceiling as the pacing above her head resumed once more. Of course he's not interested in talking to you, he wants to be left alone. Just be glad that he hasn't moved out in the middle of the night.



September, again



She'd been standing in the kitchen the first time the smell reached her nose.

Unlike the nocturnal pacing, Ladybug found the smell impossible to ignore. Musky and dense, she was reminded of the incense that had been burned in a large firepit at a Lupercalia celebration she'd attended out of town, several years earlier, the skylad ceremony ending with the Great Rite being practiced throughout the glade. The smell of sex had mingled with the heady, enticing smell emanating from the fire, the slap of hands on drum skins an echo of skin slapping skin, the ritual chants turning to moans as the ceremony devolved to a frenzied bacchanal—mouths and hands and tongues, dripping cunts and turgid cocks, all clamoring to exalt the goddess and her horned consort; fucking and screaming in divine ecstasy, echoing through the night. She'd been taken by a satyr close to the fire, held aloft in his arms as another devotee of the horned god had pressed to her front, his cock rubbing circles against her clit as the goat-man pumped into her from behind, braying his climax and ejaculating against her thighs as the man at her front spilled across her belly . . .

She jolted, stopping short in her recollections, nearly dropping the glass she'd been moving from the dishwasher to its place in the cupboard. These were certainly *not* appropriate thoughts to be having in the middle of the day, especially when she needed to mentally prepare for a meeting with a potential new customer that afternoon, a woman seeking an archaic cure for a malady her doctors could not diagnose. Pushing that intoxicating smell and thoughts of past ritual sex rites away, Ladybug determinedly went about her day, but the smell seemed stronger once she was ensconced in her sheets that night—thick and heavy, like a black cloud of licentiousness, pinning her to the mattress and licking up her exposed legs.

The smell was inescapable, and even when she left the house, Ladybug was certain she could still detect it, clinging to her clothes and hugging her skin, caressing her like a lover. The worgen at the bank ducked his head, avoiding eye contact as she stood at his window until her transaction was complete, behavior she noticed replicated in the goblin who bagged her groceries. Ladybug was tempted to drop into Jack Hemming's downtown office, just to see if the big werewolf's nose would wrinkle at the smell of her, confirming her suspicions . . . but when she returned home, she'd breathe it in, a sense of complacent relief flooding her, and she'd need to remind herself of the waiting order queue and her dwindling client list to keep herself from floating upstairs to her room to stretch out against the duvet and luxuriate in the thick, heavy odor trapped in the fibers.

Her sleep, once she was finally able to fall asleep each night, had been restless since that first day the dark aroma invaded her nose. Closing her eyes seemed nigh impossible as she lay awake in the darkness, listening to the heavy sounds above her, smelling that smell and gripping the edges of her quilt, attempting to prevent her hands from finding their way between her thighs, to smear and rub at the slickness there, an arousal she scarcely understood, arousal borne from that all-encompassing odor. Her nostrils would twitch as she worked each morning, methodically filling her small queue of orders, not realizing she was grinding her hips against the edge of her work stool until her ingredients sat forgotten before her, her hands gripping the edge of the countertop with white knuckles as she chased an elusive release. Her dreams, when she dreamed, were an erotic tumult: the thick, black cloud of that heady musk taking form, stretching her legs wide and filling her, plumbing her body deeper than any ritual lover ever had, settling over her like a veil until it enveloped her completely, leaving her gasping in pleasure and sucking it into her lungs until they were one and the same. She would wake with her thudding heartbeat matching the pulse of her sex as she came down from her orgasm, panting around the thick musk that still invaded her lungs.

It was maddening, and it could not go on.

As the days wore on, the nameless tension in the house seemed fit to bust through the walls, seeping under doorways and around corners, crowding her against her work table much in the same way she had once imagined Anzan doing, an inescapable pressure that was ready to erupt. Ladybug wondered what the aunts would say, were they still there to give her counsel, how they would advise her to proceed.

“You must learn what the darkness discovers, little one.” She could hear Willow’s words, could still smell the struck match and see the wavering light of the candle she had lit as Ladybug stood at her side, just a child then, staring down the long hallway where the shade had glided like a silver mist. “It’s never truly the darkness we fear, Ladybug, nor the things that lurk there. It is only the unknown. Once the darkness is known, it can’t hurt you. There’s nothing there to fear.”

This darkness ached with need, she decided. The growing agitation above her head, the thick, black smell . . . *you must learn what the darkness discovers*. There was nothing in this house that could hurt her, but the tensivity trapped within the four walls seemed fit to burst through the roof, and she very much needed her roof to survive the winter, until the repair work she’d scheduled come spring could begin. She would knock on the attic door again. Would knock until he had no choice but to answer her, and put an end to this nocturnal madness.



In the end, he had come to her.

Although, she supposed, who knew how long things would have continued if she’d not gone to the farm that day. The approaching sabbath weighed heavily on her mind, filling her with a tension that had nothing to do with the smells and sounds in her house. That storm in August had not only ushered in the noises and pacing and the distracting smell but also blowing winds and rain, with September bringing more blustery nights and crisp, sunny days. She visited one of Cambric Creek’s farms to buy supplies for the approaching weekend’s Mabon celebration, filling her lungs with much-

needed fresh air, cool and crisp and damp, with no hint of the cloying black musk. It would be a solitary feast, but she was determined to honor the sabbath well: fresh apples and cider, thick golden honey, pumpkins and squash, a fine cut of meat. There would be no family with whom she would break bread, no circle of sisters coming together to honor the harvest and welcome the Holly King back to the world, no one to share in the timeless devotions. If she raised her voice in song, it would be alone; a solitary bonfire and an unshared feast.

Not like any of that was a surprise, she reminded herself, arriving at the farm.

The harvest moon and Mabon would fall within the same weekend, an unusual occurrence, and one that would have meant a great celebration within the coven. She would be staying home, she'd already decided. The community festival would not have the same reverence, wouldn't have the same chanting or songs, wouldn't pay respect to the Dark Mother in the right way. There were several tinctures that would need to be completed under the moon, remedies and elixirs for paying customers, and that superseded a foolish desire for company that might distract her from her solitary place in the world.

Putting away the supplies she'd picked up from the farm, Ladybug turned to the weathered grimoire the Aunts had left her and began the day's first order. Calendula and ginger, a splash of olive oil and the talon of a harpy, orange blossom-infused water and a single sprig of mint . . . she peered into the small cauldron, ensuring she'd not forgotten anything, and set the flame on low before jogging down the back stairs. Laundering her autumn wardrobe needed to be a top priority she'd realized once she'd returned from her errand at the farm, surveying the rows of sundresses and shorts hanging in the closet. Dutifully pulling an armload of sweaters and long-sleeved dresses from the cedar chest that had belonged to her mother, she piled her arms high, bringing them downstairs to wash after months of being packed away.

She was coming upstairs after her second laundry run, barely able to see around the towering laundry basket she carried when she encountered him. The stairwell was filled

with a looming black shape that had not been there on the descent, blocking her path and obliterating the sunlight that streamed through the window at its back. *His* back, she realized, flattening herself to the wall with a gasp.

The araneaen before her was enormous, filling the entire stairwell, leaving her trapped where she stood. His unsegmented carapace was black and gleaming and full, the numerous legs that held him were thick and strong. Patches of dense, supple-looking black fur dotted the joints of those powerful legs and around the waist of the human torso that bloomed from the spider-like bottom half, bearing the same brilliant white markings that decorated his spider half. She could feel her mouth hanging open, could almost hear one of the aunts admonishing her that she'd catch a fly that way, but Ladybug was unable to force her jaw shut as her eyes roved over this stranger, so different from the hunched, whispery-voiced tenant who'd moved in, so different than what she'd been envisioning for months. His upper half was as robust and well-formed as his spider hindquarters: broad shoulders and two — *two!* — sets of heavy, well-built arms, thick with muscle. His broad chest was barely contained by the tight-fitting t-shirt he wore, and her mind tripped over the *staggering* difference and the supposition of where on earth he purchased his shirts. A strong jaw, firm chin, three sets of glossy black eyes leading to and framing glimmering, dark blue human-looking eyes, fringed in heavy dark lashes. His eyes were just as striking as they'd been that first day she'd led him up the staircase, and she might have been able to convince herself that this huge, muscular stranger was a relation, a visitor her spindly tenant was entertaining . . . but there was no way those eyes could have been replicated in another. His handsome face was as unsmiling as she remembered it.

“*Anzan?*” she gasped, hardly able to believe her eyes. *Hallucinating again. It must be the salvia, probably need to pitch the whole batch . . .* The figure before her moved, massive and oh-so-real, and she backed into the wall, desperate to stay upright. Somehow, her frail, unhealthy tenant had been transformed over the spring and summer to the

heavily-built model specimen before her, and Ladybug couldn't account for how or why. Had he managed to bring a weight machine up the attic stairs without her notice?! *He's not pacing at night, he's doing a kettlebell routine. Look at him! You should have tried harder to learn about araneae.* A cloying cloud of musk, primal and sexual, enveloped the narrow hallway, and the noise that came unbidden from her throat was nearly a moan. It was coming from Anzan, she realized, had been coming from him the whole time. "You-you're looking well," she managed to squeak, an understatement if there ever was one.

"Allow me."

His voice was dark as pitch, rich and deep, wheezing with air no longer, like a silky slide of black satin that caressed the air around her, leaning in close. Ladybug closed her eyes, arching her back in surrender, presenting herself as willing prey . . . only for her eyes to pop open in surprised bewilderment as he relieved her of the laundry basket, leaving her form unmolested. *Good, that's a relief. Right?* The smooth wall provided little purchase as her hands scrabbled for hold, unable to pull her eyes from him as she inhaled deeply, feeling herself go cross-eyed for a moment from the overpowering smell that rolled off him, reminiscent of patchouli and copal and a sex-and-sweat-drenched field. It had been too long since she'd observed the sabbath in such a way, too long since she'd joined in a primal celebration of sex magick, and the itch beneath her skin that had been ignited by this thick, tumid smell clearly needed slaking.

Calm down, you're like a cat in heat! The thought made her jolt, hands scrabbling anew as she stared up at those numerous, penetrating eyes. *A heat. A heat!* His scent glands were working overtime, and she realized, at last, it was likely a pheromone he was putting out — the swollen, heavy smell of sex, advertising his arousal, and slick pooled between her thighs anew as she breathed it in. Heats were a serious business, and she'd read more news stories than she could count over the years about fights and altercations that had taken place between residents in the grips of seasonal heats; the dental hygienist at her dentist's office was a seasonal

assistance aide on the side, and the goblin had confessed to making excellent money doing the job. But Anzan had clearly not sought out any method of easing his hormonal agony, and she wondered how long araneaen heats lasted. *It's been weeks!*

“Please, pardon me . . .” Dark and sinuous, his voice curled around her ear as he backed up and lowered himself, head bowing, allowing her to pass. “It was not my intention to startle you.”

Her feet felt leaden, each step more halting than the last as she shuffled past him awkwardly, the smell — *that smell!* — filling her like an empty pitcher, crowding out her loneliness and isolation until there was nothing left but *want* and *need*, the same desperation she heard in the pacing above her head each night. She didn't know anything about araneaens, she thought for the millionth time in dismay, didn't know anything about their mating habits or what he needed to make this heat pass, but *sweet mercy*, she wanted to give it to him, wanted to give him everything.

His eyes were the most vivid shade of blue she'd ever seen; a deep, rich cobalt, and they followed her as she edged past, causing the tiny hairs to raise on her neck and her spine to ripple, a sensation she'd felt before. Her monthly deipnon observance took place bare beneath the black sky in her well-shielded back garden, and although she'd never once seen anything that gave credence to the niggling feeling at the back of her mind, she was positive she had felt eyes upon her, on more than one occasion. The same tingle up her back, the same scrutiny that made her breathless . . . but there was never anyone in the attic window, no sign that she was under surveillance. *Still*. He'd known she was outside during the Lammas sabbath, had been watching her closely enough that he'd had time to remake her doll without her notice, and the notion that he'd been watching her solitary, skylad ceremonies made her mouth run dry. *He can't go on this way.*

Stopping before the landing that led to the kitchen door, she turned to face him once more, unable to leave the stairwell without at least attempting to address the tension that seemed to ripple and fill the darkness each night. “Anzan . . . you-

you've been a perfect tenant. I'm very glad to have rented to you . . . I—I hope you've settled in well here, that you're enjoying Cambric Creek." The crescent of her nails bit into the meat of her palm as her fists clenched, hating the way her voice shook and stammered. He had lowered himself further as she passed, his square chin pointing down to the ground, that same position of deference before her. It was a long moment before he spoke.

"Being permitted to stay under your roof is a great gift, and I value the honor and trust you've bestowed upon me despite my kind, even though I was a stranger to you."

She swayed where she stood, expecting neither the sentiment nor the seriousness of his words. "Oh! Oh, I—I'm very glad to hear that. But Anzan . . . if-if there's anything you need . . . anything at all . . ." The smaller obsidian eyes blinked in a rippling wave of motion, but the larger cobalt eyes remained locked on hers as his head cocked slightly. "Please don't hesitate to ask if there's anything you need." Ladybug licked her lips, feeling every bit the tiny insect under his scrutiny. The smell of him was nearly taking her off her feet, and her body was reacting to it in a most unseemly way — her nipples had tightened beneath her shift, and she pressed her thighs together so tightly she wondered if he would notice the way she trembled. *Just ask him what he needs. This can't go on forever.* He was most active and agitated at night, she thought, when the house was enveloped in darkness and the smell of his arousal seeped into her dreams. "I've—I've not been sleeping very well lately, so there's no bad time for you to . . . if you need me for anything . . . anything at all . . . I'm just a knock away."

His expression was inscrutable as he stared, nodding after a moment, inclining his head once more as she stepped through the door. Once the kitchen door clicked shut, she dropped the basket he'd set on the top step and slumped against the door, the thought of him there, just on the other side making something in her ache, the smell of him still heavy in the hallway. She was uncertain if she'd made her meaning clear, but whatever was happening beneath her roof had reached a breaking point, she was certain.

The little cat-shaped timer above the cauldron hook went off at that moment, and Ladybug jumped at the jarring noise, jolting her back to propriety and sense. She turned to her work, her book and cauldron and order queue, pushing away the confusing arousal and jumbled thoughts, her lungs still straining to breathe around him, unable to pull her mind free from the sucking morass of his need, and uncertain if she wished to do so at all.



Green to gold, then fall away,
Candle burn and flower fade,
Lengthen night and shorten day,

The old window shook in its casement as moonlight stretched across the bedroom. The threat of rain hung over the town, and the promise of a soggy Mabon celebration lifted her spirits.

A witch who will not observe the sabbaths is not a witch at all.

If the moon was concealed under clouds and the streets awash in a chilly Autumn deluge, she didn't have to think about the sisters who would be dancing in a field, lighting candles and chanting prayers to the Dark Mother. *We have no choice but to cast you out.* A group of women, bedraggled from the storm and gathered in someone's basement; crowded and cramped as they performed the ancient ritual was far less covetous a scenario, after all.

*Bud to flower, stalk and vine,
Give light to our hearth and bless this wine,*

Her own private ceremony would take place beneath the sky regardless, in the privacy of the backyard. A canopy of cornstalks and flower-woven branches had been constructed on the flagstone terrace, a cozy cavern in which she would light her altar candles and partake of her lonely Mabon feast, giving thanks for the second harvest. *Cast out.*

Hecate lead us through the night,

'Til the sun returns its warmth and light

She wondered if she ought to invite Anzan to join her. The araneaen had been pacing since mid-afternoon in an unceasing rhythm, and the creaks and groans of the floorboards had eventually become a comfortable white noise, a backdrop against the day's tasks. She'd retired that evening hardly paying it any mind for the first time in weeks, as distracted as she was thinking about the festivities she would not be joining in the next night. *Tomorrow morning, you should invite him tomorrow morning.* It would be nice, not to be alone. She would proceed with her Mabon tradition, her songs and chants and thanks-giving ritual, but having company would distract her from thoughts of the coven. It was with this thought that she drifted to sleep, rocked on the almost comforting sound of the heavy tread above her.

The smell pressed her to the mattress in her dreams, thick black tendrils that dragged up her legs and cupped her breasts beneath the thin cotton of her nightdress, invading her nose and mouth until they filled her. The steady cadence of the pacing above had taken on a hypnotic quality, a rhythmic pulse that her hips raised to meet, the heady black musk filling her sex as fully as it filled her lungs. The solid thump above her head pumped into her, thrusting with the same repetitive cadence as the pacing until she trembled around it, around him, choking on the musk as she came around the smell.

When she awoke with a start, the house was silent. Ladybug gasped, head reeling as she jerked upright with a gasp, disorienting herself for a moment. The pounding of her heart matched the ebbing pulse between her slickened thighs as she struggled out of the tangled sheets. The room was lit by the nearly full moon, soft white light bathing the end of the bed, and nothing seemed out of place. The silence was a deafening roar.

Anzan! It had been weeks since the house had been muted at night, weeks since she hadn't been kept awake with the audible presence of the araneaen upstairs, and the absence of scuttling footfalls pacing above made her shiver. *He couldn't have left. But . . . but what if he's hurt?!* The thought that the

day-long pacing may have precipitated some sort of health issue had her scrambling to her knees . . . when the smell hit her, invading her senses. Heavy black musk, opaque and sensual, tightening her lungs and nipples almost simultaneously, still filling the room as if he were in the bed beside her. *Anzan*. At least she knew he'd not vanished in the middle of the night, as the lack of sound upstairs might have denoted. She wondered if the sudden quiet was what had woken her when she heard it. A knock at the bedroom door. Three light taps, just loud enough to have pulled her from sleep, soft enough that she would have missed them if they'd been competing with the normal clatter above her head. The smell seemed to thicken as she slipped from her bed, too conscious of the way the moonlight gleamed on her short, white nightgown, sucking in a lungful of musk before she opened the door.

Ladybug was able to feel her jaw working, her throat trying to produce sound, but as she stood there staring up at the massive, bare-chested araneaen in the now-open doorway, she was as silent as he had previously been for months, as mute as she'd been the night of the Hexennacht disaster, unable to give voice to the maelstrom in her head.

“You said to knock if I needed anything.”

His voice was as black and plush as it had been the previous afternoon in the stairwell, deep and rich with a strength it had not possessed back in the spring. The smell of him was making her legs shake, the doorjamb seeming too far away as she reached out to grip it unsteadily.

“Y-yes?” Her voice was barely a whisper, unable to fully draw breath around the tumaceous weight of the room. “Do-do you . . . need something?”

The brilliant blue of his eyes held her spellbound as he nodded wordlessly, pushing his way into the moon-lit room, filling the space. His cock, she realized, backing up until her legs hit the bed, was already distended.

Gleaming black like the rest of his spider half, larger than anything she would have dared imagine and shaped like

nothing she'd ever seen before. Three black orbs, the largest sprouting from the slit in his arachnid abdomen and decreasing slightly towards the tip, dotted with the same white markings he bore on his back and legs, ending in a head that seemed to open like a flower, a rounded tip softening the point of it. Her eyes traced up the gleaming black cock, taking in the textured ridges moving up the underside, joining the black orbs in a way that made her whimper, ending at the glimmering at the tip, where a silvery drop of pre-come oozed in the moonlight, bobbing slightly as he advanced into the room. Ladybug swallowed around her heart, considering Anzan's presence in her bedroom in the middle of the night, smelling of sex and need, his swollen cock presented to her.

She *did*, after all, tell him to knock if there was anything he needed, and his need was clear.

"Am-am I able to help?" The tremor in her voice had nothing to do with fear, and he nodded again. Clamoring backward onto the bed, she saw immediately that she was at a perfect height to take his cock into her mouth as Anzan continued his advance, the overwhelming smell filling the room like a cloud. "Is it a heat?" she gasped out as he continued his approach, his numerous legs lowering until his gleaming cock was perfectly level with her. Another silent nod, confirming her guess, and Ladybug squared her bare shoulders. She was uncertain and timid ninety percent of the time, but she was steadfast in her craft. "Then you must let me help," she insisted as if his shimmering cock-tip wasn't nearing her lips at that very moment. "I'm a healer. I can help you."

The sound of his hiss cut through the weight of the room as her tongue met the glistening tip, licking away the silvery liquid before circling around the curious lily-shaped head, stiffening when her lips began to tingle, heat blooming between her legs at *finally* finding the source of that delectable smell. His chest rumbled as she sucked, the vibration moving down his body until she felt it against her teeth, more of that tingle-inducing pre-come welling against her tongue.

When her jaw protested at the sphere of his cock's first segment, his huge hand palmed her head, a razor-sharp nail tracing delicately over her scalp as he gripped his shaft in another hand. She allowed herself to be directed like a doll as he moved the head around her mouth, smearing her lips and tongue with the viscous fluid he leaked, coating her mouth until she was forced to swallow, carrying the tingling sensation down her throat.

Ladybug closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, the same way she did when she focused on her potion work as his heavy cock pushed into her numbed throat, arching her back when she felt the graze of his nails once again, his hands pushing into her hair to grip her head gently. After all, she rationalized sensibly, pressing her tongue against the ridged underside until he hissed again, was this not the same sort of healing magic? He was swollen with need, heavy and pained with his arousal, and had been suffering so for weeks, right above her head. She knew it would probably be viewed as unseemly by others, that sucking her boarder's cock was an act of carnality and not one of caritas, but she was a healer and had sworn oaths to the sacred mother to assist those in need. Besides, helping to relieve him of this pent-up ichor was the least she could do for such a model tenant.

It surprised her then, when a short while after she'd begun sucking him in earnest, never managing to make it beyond that first sphere even with the numbing effect, he pulled back with a groan.

"That's very good," he murmured, running one of those talon-like nails over her swollen bottom lip, "a very nice treat . . . but that's not what I need, little bug."

She comprehended immediately. This was what the weeks of tension and pacing had been leading to, after all, this was why she'd opened her door to him. She would help him through his heat and he would scratch the itch his smell had ignited in her skin.

"Do you trust me, little bug?"

Did she? He'd never given her reason not to, isn't that what she'd told herself all those months ago? Quiet and respectful, an invisible presence who'd never given her a reason to fear for her safety, despite what was said about the spider-folk. If he'd appeared in her doorway weeks ago — healthy and well-fed and horny after a summer spent doing whatever it was he'd done, she'd have had been casting repelling charms, planting jasper at the side door and painting the doorjamb with rosemary and yew, keeping him well away. As it was though, he'd been suffering, pacing in the attic, night after night. Putting out a scent to signal his need to mate, waiting for a receptive female to respond . . . and every night she'd lain in her bed, smelling and listening, feeling her own arousal grow in response to his. The rising tension in the house had, indeed, reached its breaking point, and she was the only one who could put an end to the extended suffering of all concerned.

She thought of the lovely pot of mums flanking the porch steps, cheerful yellow now joining the rich red, appearing after an afternoon she'd been out visiting a client several towns away; of the perfectly weeded garden, a task she'd barely needed to do since the beginning of summer, of the fragrant licorice scent of the foreign plant she carefully tended in the sunny well. He'd never made her feel unsafe, and she was certain she could trust him now. *Alone, together.* Ladybug sucked in a slow breath, centering herself with squeezed-shut eyes to call on the Dark Mother for guidance and protection, for it would be a long night . . . but she was helpless to trust him. When her eyes opened, she was surprised to find that he'd lowered himself further, his giant hand cupping the side of her face without managing to touch her, a hair's breadth away. His ears were pointed, similar to an elf's, something she'd never noticed before, and she wondered how sensitive they would be to her touch. The heat of his mouth was close, so close, close enough that she felt the warmth of his slight exhalation when she closed the distance, pressing her cheek to his palm.

“You do me a great honor,” he murmured, deep and pitch black, a hot caress against her neck. “Such a fair, delicate mate

. . . and I swear it on my life, I will never bring you harm.” His other hand moved like a shadow down her body, not quite making contact with the bright, white cotton that separated her skin from his, but she felt it all the same. His deference, his bowed head and reverent tone . . . she didn’t know anything about araneaen culture, but she was certain he meant what he said, just as she was certain if she told him to leave, he’d do so at once. Perhaps she was an easy mark — after all, he saw how alone she was . . . but she’d had months to see that he was the same. *Alone, together.*

His mouth was close, close enough that she was able to incline her head slightly and meet it with her own. Her lips still tingled as she brushed them against his, the tip of her tongue tracing their shape until his own darted out to meet hers, and when his teeth captured her lower lip, exerting the barest bit of pressure against her tender flesh, she whimpered. Sex magick of the most potent kind, she considered, given freely and enthusiastically by all involved.

“Let me have you, little bug.”

Ladybug swayed, the dark curl of his voice licking up her neck. There was something about the name he called her, so similar to the pet name she’d been bestowed with when she’d come into the aunts’ care; something about the way he uttered it in his silky black voice, sending another undulation up her spine, and after an interminable moment, she nodded. She *did* trust him. She wanted to help him through his heat, wanted to put an end to the tension in her home . . . wanted to not be alone. She wanted him.

“Then have me,” she whispered, arching when his hands pressed to her at last. *You must learn what the darkness discovers.*

She’d taken part in more than her fair share of sex rituals over the years. There was a marked difference between socializing and craftwork, for while she was often overwhelmed and timid in social situations, she was steadfast in her craft. Making pleasant, flirtatious conversation over a shared meal sounded like agony, but exalting the goddess in an unknown place with a stranger — that was different. It was

about the season and the Great Rite, about the craft and tradition, and had little to do with her. She was a healer, and helping Anzan through his heat was an act of healing, but there was no way to separate the fact that *this* act had everything to do with her, unlike those ritual sex nights of years past.

A wide hand encircled her waist, pulling her close, while two others cupped the swells of her breasts through the fabric of the thin nightgown, and still *another* tangled in the untamed frizz of her hair. There were too many arms to keep track of, and as they moved over her skin reverently, her head dropped back, unused to such attention. When when the hand in her hair moved to trace her jaw gently before tipping her head back and to the side, her eyes opened, her mouth forming an *o* of surprise. Moonlight caught on the gleaming white fangs he bared, and she realized his intent with a strangled yelp.

“Wait! You-you don’t need to do that! I’m . . . receptive!” Araneaen venom was a powerful aphrodisiac, one that was regularly used in the love potions she was contracted to brew, would leave her pliable and at his mercy, as if she weren’t already there. She didn’t know how to tell him she was already dripping, the heavy smell of him and the act of sucking his cock igniting the fire in her belly, the slick of her earlier climax seeming paltry compared to the arousal flooding her ready cunt; ready to take him without needing the benefit of his fangs.

“I *appreciate* that,” he emphasized, stroking her cheek with the edge of that lethal nail, “but your enthusiasm will have its limits. Females of my kind are much larger than males, and you are only human. I don’t wish to damage you, little bug. This will . . . help.”

Ladybug felt the tickle of his long hair on her bare arm, the heat of his mouth on the white column of her throat, the deep rumble of his growl as he inhaled against her pulse. The bite stings only for a moment, instantly replaced with heat blooming across her skin from where his fangs sunk into the side of her neck. She’d sampled araneaen venom before — it was important for a witch to be intimately familiar with every

ingredient in her arsenal, after all, but to be administered directly from the source . . . she was unprepared for the fire that raced through her veins, for the moan that crossed her lips, for the speed the venom affected her, nor for the desperate need to be *possessed* by the araneaen looming over her.

“Tomorrow is the second harvest,” she blurted as she was scooped up, giving him pause before turning to gently deposit her in the chair near the door. “The Mabon feast and the moon ceremony . . . you-you can join me if you’d like, after you’ve rested.”

Anzan said nothing for a long moment, bending low before her again. She didn’t know anything about araneaen culture but she suspected she would like it, as he continued to bend, not stopping until his lips brushed the tops of her toes. A razor-sharp nail *shinked!* through the straps at her shoulders, and the ruined scrap of cotton was pulled away, leaving her bare beneath him as he raised once more.

“Then we shall break tomorrow evening, if it would please you, little bug, for your feast day.”



The web was constructed between the antique posts of her bed, a thick and sturdy-looking work of art she had little ability to admire in her compromised state. She was panting by the time he placed her in the soft, springy center, lifting her foot and placing a hot kiss to the side of her ankle. Ladybug watched as her leg was encased, first one, and then the other, the venom racing through her veins making her twist with need as her knees were pushed apart. An open-work pattern with intricate knots and braiding that crisscrossed up her skin, it was the most beautiful thing she’d ever been put in, raiment fit for an araneaen queen, the braiding following the trail of fire left by his mouth. Around her knees and over her hips, the tensivity of the silken strands secured her snugly, pulling her legs open wide. She was unsure why, in all of her preposterous daydreams or nocturnal fantasies, she never imagined herself with him in an actual web. It shouldn’t have

been surprising, all things considered, but she wondered about the state of her attic, if this was how he normally lived.

She tensed when strong hands encircled her wrists, raising them over her head to press to the sticky web above her in a vice-like grip, while his other hands landed on her hips, holding her tight as he mounted her without preamble. *There's no going back after this.* It would hurt, she realized, if she wasn't dripping and made pliable from his burning venom. His cock was bigger and thicker than anything she'd ever had before, and Ladybug arched against her bonds, feeling each sphere press into her, each one bigger than the last, filling, filling, filling her until she was certain her belly would balloon with the shape of him. *You're a healer; you're a healer; you can do this . . .* Anzan didn't stop until he was completely hilted; his swollen, needy cock stretching her walls beyond what she'd previously thought possible, before bottoming out with a grunt. The hands at her wrists moved to drag down her body, leaving her hands trapped in the sticky webbing. Over her throat and down her sternum, cupping her breasts in wonder. His cock was an uncomfortable pressure, the only thing that kept her from enjoying the way he squeezed and stroked, kneading her breasts until her nipples had completely hardened.

“Such softness,” he murmured, plucking at a nipple until she gasped, at the same time that he pulled his cock back several inches, before thrusting into her with a groan. “So soft and tight.”

Despite the venom, his first dozen thrusts were an uncomfortable pressure: too big, too hard, she was stretched too full and winced at the burn. His many eyes were closed, preventing him from seeing her pained expression as he set a driving pace, climaxing with a hiss after less than a minute, painting her thighs with his release as he pulled out. She had a mind to stop him then, but the hands at her hips slipped to cup her ass, tilting and raising her, refastening the webbing, and when he pressed into again, pleasure bloomed where pain had previously tightened her muscles.

“There we are,” he crooned as she gasped, pumping into her in a way that seemed to hit every nerve ending in her body. The ridges of his segmented length rubbed at her inner walls, directly stimulating that spongy spot within that made her back arch beneath him as he pistoned, growling against her neck as she moaned. “So good and tight . . .”

Another slight shift, a flash of white behind her eyes, the sacred Goddess spot within her feeling as though it were trapped between two of the spheres of his cock, and with every thrust it was pulled back and forth, the ribbed ridges moving over it as it was pulled, and she was certain something inside her was about to burst. His hands had moved back to her hips, his thumbs meeting at the top of her pubic bone, just slightly too high to give her clit the pressure it desperately craved.

“H-hands,” she keened, panting for breath as he fucked her relentlessly. “Lower.”

Keen blue eyes bore into her hers, the smaller black eyes blinking in a ripple. When his fingers slid down uncertainly, hesitating over her the swollen bud of her clit, the moan that ripped from her throat made his mouth split, gracing her with the very first smile she’d ever seen light his face, and his fangs dripped in triumph.

“Here? This is the place that pleases you?”

She squeezed her eyes tight, the thought of those razor-like talons so close to her most sensitive anatomy warring with the mind-rattling sensation of his long fingers rolling over her clit, the fingers that pulled at her sensitive nipples, the push-and-pull-and-drag sensation within her causing well pf pressure to break. She’d never felt such an eruption, had never had a partner who could stimulate her body in such a way, had never exalted the goddess so well. Anzan hissed as she came with a startled yelp, fluid gushing from her like a pent-up dam, dripping down their bodies as her cunt clenched around his cock, the enormous release making her eyes roll back.

“Let me hear how I please you, little bug.” His voice was a rumble as he resumed his pumping, coming again before the aftershocks of her own climax had ebbed away. Ladybug felt

the moment he emptied inside of her — his thick cock pulsing, filling her with a tingling heat, making her legs twitch within their sticky, webbed confines, the fullness causing her body to contract anew. *Dark Mother, I'm sorry for the pitiful excuses of celebration. I knew not what I was being deprived . . .*



Any other partner might have been flagging after two releases, but the black smell of his arousal was still great, and when he withdrew from her again, his cock still stood thick and hard.

She was reminded of the cat's cradle game she'd played as a child when a long, talon-tipped finger plucked at a silky, sticky strand, swinging her around to face the floor, moving her like a puppet. The braided webbing holding her legs was pulled, bending her in a way she didn't realize her body could move, never having been that coordinated or flexible before, but in his hands, she was as graceful as an aerialist.

"No other will take you as a mate." His voice was a silky purr against her back, and she whimpered when long fingers pressed into her folds, seeking and circling around her clit. A hand at her stomach, a hand wrapped around her throat, the fourth pressed to the small of her back — he was gauging her reactions, she realized, the digits moving over her aching pearl searchingly, repeating the motion whenever her pulse quickened or her breath gasped, zeroing in with precision when she moaned. "No other will mate you while I draw breath, little bug. I swear it to you."

Threat or promise, she couldn't tell, but when his cock pressed into her once more, those ridges dragging over the spots previously undiscovered, she nearly sobbed. A promise, she decided, opening her mouth to suck him in, to choke and drown on the smell of him as he began to thrust, filling her so completely there was no way to tell when he ended and she began, filling her until they were one. A promise that might be the end of her lonely days and nights.

She was able to hear the bells of the clocktower downtown ringing in the dawn all too soon, her body hanging limp in the intricate bonds. He'd come into her close to a dozen times by then, the web-woven basin he'd created beneath her sloshing with his shimmering release.

“Do you need to sleep, my little bug?”

Fangs grazed her neck and she heard the *shink!* of his razor-like talon slicing her wrists free. Several more cuts and she dropped, cradled in his many arms: one around her back, another under her legs as a hand smoothed at her hair, still a fourth wiping gently between her legs. Her eyelids were weighted and heavy, her head unable to lift from his shoulder, but she was enormously pleased with herself. She'd helped him through his heat, and the peace in her home could be restored. She was a healer, after all, and she'd not even needed to employ spellwork.

Despite the sunlight streaming through the windows, darkness closed in steadily. She was still cradled to his strong chest, and Ladybug thought that when she woke, after finishing the day's chores, she would tap on the attic door to remind him to join her for the Mabon feast. He was even welcome to watch her perform the ancient rites, to sit beside her alter as she drew down the moon, could assist in passing athame and chalice and ring, and when it was finished he could be her partner in the Great Rite beneath the sky, to truly celebrate the goddess.



She was swaying when she returned to consciousness later that morning, after sleeping for several hours curled in his arms. She could not see. Her wrists were bound securely in the springy web, and the sticky, silken strands moved down her body in an intricate diamond pattern, cupping her breasts and wrapping over her hips in a way that rendered her motionless. Her ankles were bound as snugly as her wrists, her legs splayed open in a way wouldn't have been able to manage for long on her own, her positioning reminding her of a carnival she'd attended long ago, and the beautiful, bird-like

woman who'd used columns of silk knotted around her body to traverse the air. Ladybug tensed when the web bounced with his movement, feeling him near, her eyelids fluttering uselessly beneath the blindfold. She could feel the heat of his mouth hovering over her sex, could almost feel the wetness of his tongue sliding against her, *needed* to feel the tingle of his venom . . . but he held back and she whimpered as his fangs scraped the delicate skin of her inner thigh, struggling against her bonds.

“Let me have you, little bug.”

She was unable to answer, unable to form coherent thought, as mute and insensible as she'd been a dozen other times before, although not for reasons as pleasurable. His tongue was a molten heat, stroking against her slickened folds and licking her clit with a slow, tortuous motion. It had been a very long night, and he'd proven a devoted student, as dedicated to his craft as she was to hers. The delicate petals of her sex were a mystery to him, she'd discovered, so different from females of his own kind, and he'd diligently suckled and stroked, using fingers and tongue to bring her to climax in between his own until she was too over-sensitized to continue, earning another flash of that rare smile.

Now he did not hold back, employing the tricks he'd learned over the course of his study until she was writhing. His fangs dragged over the delicate skin of her inner thigh as his tongue delved, fucking her in a slow undulation as her clit was trapped between two kneading knuckles. A hand at her hair, a hand at her breast . . . she had studied him as well, and learned his favorite places to lavish attention. When his tongue carried a glimmering droplet from his fangs to her hooded pearl, Ladybug was unable to stifle the way she whined, nor the way she struggled against the webbing binding her.

“Let me have you, little bug,” he repeated, a whisper against her thigh before her clit was sucked into his mouth and flooded in venom, words dying her throat, supplanted with a half-strangled sob as he sucked and lapped until she was a quivering, boneless heap, thankful for the web as she came

against his tongue. “No god has ever been gifted with such a sweet nectar.”

A strand was plucked and the web swung, positioning her in such a way that his mouth was suddenly beneath her, allowing him to drink from her pulsing cunt like a chalice.

By then she understood his request. He wanted to bite her, for his venom to make her pliable once more; wanted to mount her again, to fuck her until she was practically unconscious, and it *should* have terrified her. She should have been horrified, frightened that there was no end in sight to the way he used her body, for that intoxicating smell still weighed upon her and Anzan was nowhere near satisfied, his cock still heavy and erect — perhaps not as swollen as it had been in her room the previous night, but his climaxes still yielded a warm gush of silvery fluid into her at regular intervals, with no end in sight — but she only felt delirious with pleasure, his venom filling in the gaps of her body’s ability to withstand being fucked repeatedly.

It was her own fault, though, Ladybug reminded herself. She’d asked, at some point the previous night, if araneaen heats always lasted this long, if he would ever find relief . . . only to be shocked by his answer.

“It’s never been like this before,” he’d admitted darkly, remaking a portion of the great web to place her in a new angle. “They come on twice a year, but without a receptive female the urge quickly passes.”

“Wh-what do you mean? What receptive female?”

He’d pressed his lips in a grim line before continuing, lifting her like a doll to fit into the new configuration.

“Females in my culture are . . . I do not know the word for it in your tongue. They determine mating. They are revered above all others.” Ladybug swallowed, thinking of his deference from that first moment out on her sidewalk. “Our males go into heat, but it is up to the female to decide if she is receptive. If there is a female who wants to mate, our heats will continue so that she might find us. But . . . I don’t know why this happened,” he added wryly.

She knew the reason though, gasping as he entered her from behind, a hand around her throat, a hand cupping her breasts, two hands holding her hips with a bruising force as he rutted. She had lain in her bed, night after night, listening to him pace, her arousal growing as the smell of him increased. He'd been putting out a pheromone for *her*. *And you left him wanting for*

nearly a month. How could she deny him now?

"Then have me," she wheezed, head still spinning from her climax, an echo of her words from the previous night. His tongue danced over the line of her femoral artery, his sharp fangs grazed her skin . . . but still he refrained, toying with her the same way her little garden cat toyed with the prey she captured in Slade Manor's tall grass.

"What do we say, little bug?"

She twisted, *needing* his venom, the smell of his heat still fogging her mind. It would be over soon, she was certain, and then she would wait, wait for the smell of his arousal to reach her when the seasons changed again, and then she would not make *him* wait again.

"*Please.*"



When she was cut loose at last, she was placed in the claw-footed tub in the bathroom across from her own bedroom, the water steaming hot as he gently rubbed feeling back into her limp, exhausted limbs. Ladybug had her first thrill of fear when she directed him to her work kitchen to fetch the loose herbs that would bring down the inflammation in her well-used body. The speed with which Anzan left made her jolt, the speed and the silence, returning after just a brief moment with the exact herbs she'd requested. He could have been coming downstairs the whole time, she realized. The silence of all those months before his heat had made him clumsy and heavy with need . . . he could have been moving silently throughout the entire house, examining her work space, standing over her bed as she slept, his numerous legs moving over each other in a seamless, graceful ballet. The notion that Zulya's words all those months ago had merit made her choke with laughter, sliding into the water until her mouth burbled beneath the surface. *It's the quiet ones indeed!*

She'd never been very good at people, but the stoic, unsmiling araneaen was different, and as he washed her hair, his impossibly long fingers gently detangling the long strands, she began to talk. She told him of the Aunts, how they'd doted on her as a child, calling her their little ladybug, teaching her the old ways. Everything she knew of the craft had been learnt at their side, adherence to tradition of both family and sisterhood, and she missed their instruction and wisdom, the love that had filled their household.

"I never really had friends, so I don't care that I don't have them now. Does that make sense? You can't miss what you've never had, so it doesn't bother me. But I've never lived alone before, I've never *not* had anyone who cared. I miss them so much." She swallowed her sob, closing her eyes and focusing on the rhythmic pressure against her scalp. "It was supposed to be different when I joined the circle, I was supposed to be one of them. But if I'd never been one of them before, why would that one night make things different?" She thought of the endless coven meetings, the conversations that happened around her and over her head, never included; of the

whispering sisters and the unspoken social rules she'd never understood.

“Hexennacht isn't a true sabbath, but it was always my favorite celebration.” The night of witches, not a sabbath of observance and thanks, but a wild night of *revelry*, of sisterhood and craft. She had always loved the unbridled bonfire night of Beltane eve, loved screaming into the wind, to all the witches who had come before her, her mother and grandmother, an unbroken line of Brackenbridge witches. “And it's ruined forever now,” she lamented, eyes overflowing as she spoke, wondering if Anzan would be able to tell the difference between the bathwater and her tears. “This was the year I was meant to take my seat, I've been an initiate since I was a teenager, but this year . . . this is when I was supposed to be a fully credentialed member of the coven.” She told him of the Hexennacht ritual, ending with all the sisters taking to the sky as one. “But I wouldn't make the flying ointment. There are a dozen different recipes, all used for centuries, but the new High Crone . . . she said we had to use the recipe she provided, no substitutions.” The recipe was barbaric and archaic, one that had been outlawed for centuries, but the new crone, Authricia's replacement, was eager to stretch her control over the circle.

“A baby?” Anzan interrupted, hands stilling in her hair. “That's uncivilized even by the standards of *my* kind. What kind of baby?”

“It doesn't matter,” she shook her head, hands trembling beneath the bathwater at the memory of that night. “There are places in the city that traffick in such things, but it doesn't *matter*. It wouldn't have worked.” She turned in the tub to face him, gripping the porcelain edges tightly with whitened knuckles. “Real magic requires sacrifice, every true witch knows this. If you've a spell that calls for rendered fat that must be human, you must carve it from your own belly. The sacrifice of another will not work in your stead, every *true* witch knows this. I would not compromise all I've been taught for the sake of their false smiles, so they cast me out.” Her tentative composure broke, and Ladybug was unable to keep her shoulders from shaking. “Cast out of the circle, the only

woman in my family . . . and they didn't care. What am I supposed to do? Who am I supposed to be? What am I, if I'm not a witch?" Her voice has risen with her anguished tears, rattling against the smooth tiles of the walls, trapped in the steam from her bathwater. "But I don't care," she continued after a moment, resolve replacing the despair. "I'm not going to let them stop me from practicing. I don't miss them. A witch does not need a coven, and I *am* a witch."

Anzan was silent as he rinsed the lather from her hair, and as it had been for the better part of the last four months, his silence was a balm. It didn't matter if they went back to their separate existences after this night, for he would be just upstairs, a silent, comforting presence as he had been all this time. Alone, together.

"In the place where I'm from, marriages are of great importance." His voice was as serious as it ever was, and Ladybug raised her eyes, tipping her head back to watch him as he spoke. A tightly brokered business, he explained, and the competing clans were vicious. "A daughter's bride price can lift a family from poverty," he explained, "but a son might bankrupt a clan unable to pay a bride price. Two sons is ruinous." There was no greater dishonor for a clan than having a son reach mating age without a secured marriage. "When we come of age, unmated sons are cast out. The elders do not want the smell of a younger, virile competitor near the wives, and the family who could not pay is rid of their shame. There is no remorse for the sons who are sent away. We're not welcome anywhere we go, for the violence of our kind is well known to all, but it matters not. They're relieved to be rid of us."

"Cast out?" She craned her neck back, watching his black eyes blink in a wave, the dark fringe of lashes on his cobalt eyes lower as he dipped his head in a slow nod. *Cast out*. Just as she had been. The aunts had always told her that the Fates were a mysterious force to be respected, and there had always been an altar to the divine trio in her home growing up. Being a landlord was hardly something she'd imagined for herself, yet somehow Clotho had conspired to make it so, sending someone just might understand her feelings of isolation and

loneliness in the process. *Cast out.* There were some things that transcended species, a lesson well learned in a place like Cambric Creek. Not so different at all, Ladybug considered.

“Prepare for your feast night, little bug.” Once the last of the water had drained from the tub, Anzan stood over her with the fluffiest towel from the linen closet, staring down at her bare form. “Just as beautiful as the nights you sing your strange songs to the moon.”

He *had* been watching her. A bubble of giddiness filled her chest, pushing the loneliness and grief aside, at least for the moment as she was lifted in his strong arms, the speed in which she was carried to her bedroom leaving her absolutely *certain* he’d been traipsing all about her house while she slept. Her hair was plaited into intricate braids, criss-crossed and weaving, wrapped around her head and secured like a crown, a beautiful design she never would have been able to manage on her own.

“You’ll join me?”

His sharp nail was a cool pressure as he caressed her cheek once more, a pressure she leaned into, shivering beneath the weight of those eight, unblinking eyes before he inclined his head.

“If it would please you, my little bug.”



“**W**e give thanks to the mother for her bounty.”

Athame, chalice, ring. Apples and honey, sweet incense on the fire, crystals and elixirs charging in the bright white moonlight. Ladybug breathed around tears as she stared up at the moon, full and luminous and ancient; stared up at the same moon that countless women like her had stared up at since time immemorial. The Aunts would be proud, she decided.

He stood behind her, tucked into the shadows of the makeshift covering on the flagstones. The rain had come down earlier, but the sky was clear as she gazed up for a moment

longer before joining her quiet companion. Anzan was silent as she set the athame in its altar spot, arranging the key and the five-petaled vervain. His many eyes had stayed locked on her form as she performed the ancient rights beneath the moon, watched when she'd slipped from her ceremonial robe to stand skyclad beneath the winking stars, watched as he'd watched her every month since the spring. Now she smiled, lifting the chalice she'd been left by the Aunts, their mother's before them, her mother's before that. Relics of the past that were her birthright, like her place beneath the moon.

The feast she'd prepared was small but hearty, the fragrant pumpkin soup overtaking, for the moment, the heady, musky aroma of the still-aroused araneaen beside her.

“Now what, little bug?”

“Now we eat. Then you'll need to make a web in the center of the yard, high enough to hold me . . . is that something you can do?”

Anzan's smile was sharp, the moonlight glinting off his fangs once more.

“I think I can manage that.”

“We'll need to start planning our Samhain celebration soon.” His smile remained as she reached to push a lock of shiny black hair from his face.

“It was me, you know.” Ladybug wasn't sure if she would ever get used to his absolute stillness, nor the sensation of his rippling eyes. She took the opportunity to cut herself another slice of the apple tart, avoiding his heavy, weighted gaze.

“You?”

“Me. It was me. I'm the reason your heat was so . . . hot. I smelled you. I wanted you. But I didn't know it was you! I didn't know I wanted *you* you. I smelled you and I started dreaming of . . . it doesn't matter. It was me. I was the receptive female. I think I would have smelled you from the other side of the world.”

The harvest moon made his blue eyes glitter, and she made a mental note to light the candle on her altar to the Fates that

night. The Mabon feast hadn't been as lonely as she'd feared. Ladybug yelped when he lifted her, strong hands at her waist picking her up as though she were a doll, his arachnid lower half raising, raising, until she felt half a story in the air. Black eyes rippled, but his blue eyes had narrowed, a firm hand gripping her chin as he glowered.

"You? You smelled me?" She could smell him still, the primal scent of black musk and arousal, wondering how he might bind her that night. "It took you long enough to let me know, little bug." His voice was a growl and her laughter was swallowed up by his mouth, sealing against hers in a kiss, the spark of his venom sweet on her tongue.



High above, the moon winked down.

*~ Anzan and Ladybug will return in Wheel of the Year pt 2
and other Cambric Creek stories ~*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



C.M. Nascosta is an author and professional procrastinator from Cleveland, Ohio. As a child, she thought that living on Lake Erie meant one was eerie by nature, and her corresponding love of all things strange and unusual started young. She's always preferred beasts to boys, the macabre to the milquetoast, the unknown darkness in the shadows to the Chad next door. She lives in a crumbling old Victorian with a scaredy-cat dachshund, where she writes nontraditional romances featuring beastly boys with equal parts heart and heat, and is waiting for the Hallmark Channel to get with the program and start a paranormal lovers series.

Want updates on when new books release? Do you love exclusive shorts? Sign up for my newsletter at: cmnascosta.com and receive an exclusive short in every one. Find me on social media—I love to chat with fans!



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ALSO BY C.M. NASCOSTA



A weekend with friends, fun in the sun, and huge, naked orcs. What could be better? That's what three suburban elves think when they book a trip to an orc nudist resort, well known for its libidinous residents and hedonistic parties. Ris, Lurielle, and Silva arrive with plans to sample the DTF locals and work on their tans, *not* catch feelings. When Lurielle meets a syrupy-voiced gentleman who seems interested in more than just a weekend fling, she finds sticking to the plan is easier said than done. From a public bathhouse to a back alley pub, the trip has unintended consequences on the lives of the three work friends and the orcs they meet. Can a weekend of no-strings sex actually end in love?



Violet is a typical, down-on-her-luck millennial: mid-twenties, over-educated and drowning in debt, on the verge of moving into her parents' basement. When a lifeline appears in the form of a very unconventional job in neighboring Cambric Creek, she has no choice but to grab at it with both hands. Morning Glory Farm offers full-time hours, full benefits, and generous pay with no experience needed . . . there's only one catch. The clientele is Grade A certified prime beef, with the manly, meaty endowments to match. *Hands-on* work with minotaurs isn't something Violet ever considered as a career option, but she's determined to turn the opportunity into a reversal of fortune. When a stern, deep-voiced client begins to specially request her for his sessions at the farm, maintaining her professionalism and keeping him out of her dreams is easier said than done. Violet is resolved to make a dent in her student loans and afford name-brand orange juice, and a one-sided crush on an out-of-her-league minotaur is not a part of her plan—unless her feelings aren't so one-sided after all.