



THE DANCE BETWEEN US

A HUNTER'S VOW, A WITCH'S CURSE

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*To the boy who danced with me under the stars in '95...
Vielen Dank, dass du all die Jahre über mich gewacht hast, als wir
Kinder waren. Ich wünschte, ich hätte mich verabschieden können.
Ich wünsche dir alles Gute für deine Zukunft.*

And As Always, to My Children.

I

The Beginning Of It All

Chapter 1

Alva giggled as her foot stepped on Lukas's. "Sorry!" she whispered. He winced, but took it like a gentleman. The music was softer where they were, but the constant rhythm of the drums and violins was still a comfort. Lukas had managed to foxtrot her out of the main dance circle, past the edge of the tent, and into the cool night air where only the stars could see them. She tried to surrender to his lead, but her mind was racing. Lukas was quieter tonight than he normally was. She felt the tension in his shoulder beneath her hand, and the nerves in her own throat tightened like a rope.

Was this it? Had he somehow found out her secret and intended to confront her here, away from the watchful eyes of the village? She forced a confident smile, hoping her fear wouldn't show. If he knew, perhaps he would be kind and let it slide. Lukas had always been kind to her, ever since his family arrived in town just over a year ago.

She glanced at his hand resting lightly on her shoulder blade, guiding her with every precise step. She was aware of his easy confidence, a trait she realized she should probably be mimicking, as her foot nearly landed on his again.

She mumbled another apology. This time, his forest-green eyes finally shone, and a quick, nervous smile broke across his

face.

“Maybe we could take a break?” he said, releasing her. She let out a ragged breath, pretending the relief was because the dance had ended. But this was it. This was the moment their relationship was going to change, or perhaps end entirely. It hurt her heart to think of it. She deeply cared... no, loved Lukas. She always felt safe and accepted with him in a way she hadn't with anyone else since he arrived with his mother and siblings in their town a few years ago. They had been together for a while, but it was a secret that only they shared. She had been a little confused about the fact that someone could be a best friend, and more, because when she looked at the other couples in their village, especially the married ones, they didn't look like best friends. They often looked like sworn enemies. But here she was, with her best friend, who was also the love of her life.

He half turned, his hand resting possessively on her hip, but his body was now pointing toward the lake below. She shifted so her body stayed close to him and turned her head to follow his gaze. She was nearly the same height as Lukas. It's something that probably would have been a problem if she had been with someone else, but Lukas didn't seem to mind. Her mom was tall, and she suspected she would be the same height and match the boys' height always. She would have preferred to stay small and cute, not tall and clumsy. Short girls could hide snugly and be lifted with ease, whereas tall girls always had to lead and be brave as they faced the world. It sounded exhausting.

Below them, the town was a scattering of warm shadows. Candlelight and torches defined pockets of life, and the nearby lake reflected their soft, hazy glow. They stood for a moment, in the comfort of each other, staring at the stars that were clustered together in a stream of sparkles.

It was beautiful. Alva could feel her shoulders relaxing. She hoped that whatever Lukas wanted to say, he wouldn't. That this moment could last in its simplicity. As her body relaxed, she leaned into him a little. He didn't push back or move. He supported her. The cool air wrapped them up in a single moment that Alva hoped would last forever. She was completely comfortable with this person. She knew he would accept her for who and what she was. She didn't have to worry. She turned to look at him. She had never been friends with a boy before, and after thinking about it, she decided that it was nice. It was less fussy than hanging out with the other girls. There was more variety in the things they could do, as a lot of the girls only wanted to hang out indoors and talk. But boys played. They jumped, they climbed... it was something different. She didn't have to worry so much about what she said or what he said, because he never really spoke to anyone else other than her. It was a much easier friendship. And yet, she was struggling to find the words to tell him what only she knew.

"I love you," Lukas blurted out.

Alva flinched, jerking slightly in his arms.

"... Alva," he finished, looking across at her.

She wasn't expecting him to say anything of that nature. She was unsure of what she should do. He turned to her, and she could see the fear of rejection in those green eyes. It was probably the first time he had told a girl that. They were, after all, sixteen years old. But Alva knew that Lukas, with his quiet strength, was the kind of boy who grew into the man you stayed with forever. He would fight for you. He would be whatever you needed—a husband, a friend, a bear to fight the world. He was what every girl dreamed of.

But Alva wasn't sure if she had the same dream as the other

girls.

It felt like she couldn't breathe, though she knew she must be. Alva ached with gratitude for Lukas's support, yet the thought of a serious conversation terrified her. She was already panicking about revealing her secret, and Lukas's confession made her feel as if her future was being decided for her. She wasn't ready. She wasn't entirely sure who she was or what she wanted. Suddenly, it hit her: telling him her secret might trap her here, unable to see the world or chase her dreams. Torn between a real love for Lukas and a desperate need to keep her future open, Alva's panic intensified.

"Lukas," she began, looking down to avoid eye contact. He stiffened. This wasn't a good start. "I... I need to tell you something..."

She had to tell him her secret now. He deserved to know everything, including the good, the odd, and the unusual. If he knew, maybe he wouldn't like her anymore, and then navigating her own tangled emotions about how she felt about him and being in a relationship when she was still figuring out her place in the world would be over. It would be best if he knew everything, and then he could decide if he wanted to stay or go. She could maybe then work out how she felt. She looked up. She did have feelings for him. She trusted him more than anyone. But her mouth stayed closed. She couldn't say it. It didn't want to come out, and the longer the two of them stood in silence, the more she was internally panicking and unable to say anything. The pressure was building with every passing second.

"THERE YOU TWO ARE!" a third voice shattered the silence.

They both looked over the ridge to see a rush of their fellow classmates laughing and tumbling over each other.

"The dance is about to be over! Everyone is packing up!"

It was true. The music had stopped, and they hadn't even noticed. Alva slipped out of the warmth of Lukas's arms and walked quickly toward the path.

Lukas stayed for a long moment, unsure of what had just happened. He had felt such relief telling Alva, finally getting out the words that had been buzzing in his brain for weeks now, but as soon as they left him, the silence after felt heavy. He thought he had done everything right. He learned the dance, he led her out, and he picked the most beautiful spot. Why had she just left?

He watched her wind her way down the path. He blinked. There was a bright, luminous blue light that seemed to detach from Alva. But that was impossible. Butterflies didn't glow. And it was nighttime. Maybe it was a moth? But, moths were usually dull colors to hide in the shadows from bats.

Maybe it was a firefly?

Why would she have had a firefly in her hand? Was it there this whole time? Was that what she wanted to talk to him about?

His heart felt heavy in his chest. He had professed his feelings, and she wanted to talk to him about fireflies? Maybe she didn't feel the same way. It hurt him to have that thought. He pushed it aside. But she did. She looked at him, and he knew she felt the same way as he did. He thought about it. He didn't tell her that he thought about her all the time. That he often would watch her prance in the meadows, with her wild, dark, black hair. He didn't tell her that everyone thought she was the weirdest girl in the village, but that he loved her whimsy. That he thought she was the most beautiful being that he had ever seen. She wasn't beautiful because of her dark hair or her blue eyes. But because of the way she laughed and did odd voices when she told stories.

He hadn't told her any of that. All he had told her was that he

loved her, and she had fumbled and left him there. But he did love her. They were together. They were a couple, even though no one knew about it, and he wanted to change that. He wanted to tell everybody that he was with Alva, the most unique girl in the village.

He watched the glowing butterfly flutter for a while from Alva, in the air before coming towards him. It landed on his shirt, and then, with a soft flicker, it dissipated.

It was magic.

Alva was a witch.

That's what she wanted to tell him.

He couldn't help but give a lopsided smile. He didn't understand why she didn't have the courage to just tell him. He didn't mind at all that she could do a little magic.

Chapter 2

She had decided that the butterfly was beautiful. Alva didn't fully understand what she was able to do with it yet. But she said things while conjuring, in the hope that the intent would work. It was all new and strange. There hadn't been a history of witches in her family, and there was no one who could show her how to master it. She was working purely off rumors, whispers, and intuition. She guessed that probably most witches did.

The butterfly danced around her hand. It was light and wonderful. As it flew, it left a small trail of sunshine behind it that sparkled in the light. They didn't last too long, almost as if there wasn't enough energy to hold them. Alva was wondering how to get around that. Perhaps if she were able to give the butterfly some sort of energy force, it would sustain them for longer.

She was trying to think of what would work when she saw movement in the corner of her eye. She quickly crushed her hand so the butterfly disintegrated mid-flight. She shifted so that she was sitting on her hands. She turned to look. There were about eight of them. Boys. Not from her class, but one class up.

She had been having problems with them for a while now.

Alva wasn't sure how it all started, but it was almost becoming a daily routine with them. She kept trying to wait for her mom in different spots and different places, but they always seemed to find her. They never ever left her alone. One of them, the blonde, was consistently staring at her. His name was Roderick, and he had always creeped her out. He was staring at her right now. They were a fair distance away. Perhaps they saw nothing.

But as she watched, his friends all stopped around him when they realized he was still. They became still as well and then turned to see what he was staring at. She could see their mouths moving, but they weren't close enough to hear. Some sort of decision was being made.

They all turned and started to move towards her.

It wasn't only a single boy anymore. They moved like organisms that were co-dependent on each other, all thinking alike. Alva remembered one of the hunters talking about the time he watched a pack of wolves hunt. The way they breathed together, eyes on the prey, moving as a single entity.

She watched the boys and realized she was the prey. She quickly got up and grabbed her bag. Perhaps she could hide. Perhaps she could run and disappear at the bottom of the garden. Her mom was supposed to be coming soon, so she couldn't run to the bottom, or else she wouldn't see her. She could run elsewhere. Maybe start on the route home, and then she would meet her mom as she was coming towards her. But what if she wasn't coming from home, but instead from somewhere else? What if she missed her? Then she would walk home while her mom searched for her, and she would get into trouble.

She would have to lose them.

"Hey!" Roderick shouted.

Alva turned and started heading towards the school field.

“HEY!” the boys shouted again.

Alva turned her head slightly to look over her shoulder. They were still walking. As soon as they bolted, she would have to as well.

“WHAT WAS THAT THING IN YOUR HANDS, ALVA?”

Alva walked faster.

They had seen. They had seen, and they knew. Why hadn't she been more careful? She should have stuck to her cupboard at home. She had let her guard down, and now they knew, and they were getting closer. She could feel them getting closer. She looked over her shoulder again. They were still a far distance away, but she wasn't going to make it. Heated tears formed in the corner of her eyes. She wiped them and got angry with herself. Why do I always cry in moments like this?

She could turn and face them; they were only boys. She could do some serious damage before it really got out of control. They probably wouldn't do anything if she did stand her ground. It was only because she was running away that this had now turned into a game. She had made this fun for them. Wolves chasing rabbits. They didn't need the rabbit or want it. It was only because the rabbit was entertaining.

She should have stayed at the small tree. Perhaps she still could. Maybe she should stop and walk back with her head held high. Confront them.

“You a witch, Alva?”

Sniggering followed the comment.

Alva looked over her shoulder. The gap was closing. How was that possible? She was walking faster than them. The gap should be bigger. At least she felt like she was walking faster. She couldn't risk them getting any closer.

She bolted. There was a shrill of yelps, whistles and noises

from the boys, as they switched up and bolted themselves. The game was on.

Alva was still clinging to her bag and books. She would try to keep them as long as possible. Her mom had worked hard to get the extra coin together for them. But she wasn't sure how long she could hold onto them.

At the bottom of the field was the jungle gym, intertwined with three branches. She knew that jungle gym better than most, but it was also a dead end. She could wait them out, maybe if she climbed beyond the jungle gym, to the top of the tree. Her mom would come in far enough for her to call for her when she finally did arrive.

She went for it. She practically flew up the first ladder, onto the platform. From there, it was a twist through the branches to the tree's center, then up and to the top platform.

The pack of boys split at the bottom.

"Witch girl!" one of them shouted. The others giggled and soon caught on.

"Witch girl!" they started chanting in unison. "Witch girl, witch girl, witch girl..."

Two of them were climbing a rope ladder that would take them to the second platform. Another two were up the other longer ladder to the main center of the jungle gym, while the last two came up the same way as Alva. They were surrounding her. But she noted that none of them stayed below. They were all moving up to encircle her. She backed up to the corner of her platform, where there was a supporting pole below. She was going to have to get her timing just right before she made her move.

"Hello Alva," Roderick said as his heavy, clumpy foot hit the platform and he moved his body weight over. Another one of the brutes was right behind him, while the other four were now

gathered on the main section, separated only by a swinging bridge to Alva. They moved in closer.

Alva waited and tried to steady herself. She could feel the hot tears were still coming from the corners of her eyes, and she hated it. She hated that they could see them. She hated that they thought she was scared. She wasn't. She was brave. Why couldn't they leave her alone? Why did they have to act this way and chase her?

Why were some boys casual and laid back, and others just bullies that wanted to watch the world burn?

What were these boys' problem anyway? So they saw her sitting there, and they saw something, maybe a little unusual... Why chase her? Why tease her? Could they not have just carried on their own lives and left her out of it?

"You a witch girl, Alva?" The boy with the dark hair and blue eyes said, smiling.

"You are an abomb-mination!" the other shouted, getting the larger word all disjointed in his tongue. Alva smiled and shot a look at the boy. These boys were idiots.

They tensed up, and they all gave each other looks. The idea was to keep her scared and nervous, not amuse her with their bad pronunciation. One of the boys clipped the one who had spoken incorrectly, over his head.

Another boy quickly started the chant again.

"Witch-girl, witch-girl, witch-girl."

Alva used one hand to hold her books, while the other tightened on the handrail behind her. She searched for where the supporting pole joined and then stayed there. This was her escape.

Roderick walked closer to her and yanked her arm. Her grip on the handrail was lost, but she quickly found it again.

“Do it again, Alva....” he said with a sinister smile. “Do that thing with your hands.”

“No,” she whispered.

“You’re just a girl, Alva, you’re not even a woman yet...” one shouted. The others giggled, looking at each other.

“Yeah, you don’t have any ‘real powers,’ just a silly girl.”

“You have no boobs!”

The boys laughed. Alva pulled her cardigan over her chest defensively and looked away.

“Why don’t you do a spell and give yourself some proper knockers!” The boy in the back shouted.

Laughter erupted over the group. Except for Roderick. Roderick just stared at her with his single smile.

“Come on, Alva,” he said, gently. “Show us what you can do, hmm? We won’t tell.”

He reached out for her arm again. Alva moved her body to the side and glared at him. Her mind was completely blank. There were things that she wanted to say and to scream at them. To tell them to fuck off and to punch that stupid smile right off his face. But she couldn’t. It all stuck in her throat. There was a barrier there. Her mind stayed clear, waiting for instruction. But it didn’t come. She was too full of emotions that felt thick and dense in her chest. It didn’t want to move from inside her. She couldn’t think of anything to say. So all she could do was convey her hatred through her eyes.

He winced. He didn’t like the way she was looking at him. He didn’t like the hate. He had wanted attention from her, and he was getting it, but it wasn’t the attention he wanted. He didn’t want her to look at him like that.

“Go on, Roderick! Make her,” one of the boys shouted. They were getting bored. The little rabbit wasn’t running.

Roderick, empowered by his mob of imbeciles, looked back at Alva and reached for her arm again, but she buckled down into a squat and twirled. With her hands firmly on the pole, she swung her body under the handrail and latched her legs to the pole under the platform. She then grasped her free hand under as well, so she could let go of the upper part of the pole and let her body spin around the pole to the ground.

Her feet landed with a small thud, and she bolted. The books she had been carrying in her hand were gone, their pages scattered in the wind, and the heavier ones thudded on the floor, but she still had her bag. Her mom was sure going to clip her ears when she got home.

As soon as she felt the safety of the ground beneath her soles, she shot off again, back towards the small tree and the main gate. The boys were still all stuck at the top of the jungle gym. They weren't as agile as her and they struggled to work out how to get down. It was not as smooth or graceful as they had come up, and soon they all bottle-necked on the ladders. Alva was already almost across the whole field before some of them were on the ground. The ones still stuck, started jumping the last few feet off the platforms and ladder to get to the bottom. One rolled his ankle as he hit the ground. He shouted in pain as the others landed around him. They were shouting at each other, to 'GO, GO, GO!' and 'MOVE!'

Alva kept running. She didn't look back. This was her chance. She tore around the small cluster of trees to the road that led out. She could see the wooden gate, and that's all she cared about. She would keep going. Maybe she could find a hedge outside to hide in while she waited for her mom. She would get into trouble for waiting outside the school grounds, but she didn't care. Rather that than whatever those boys were planning to do

to her.

“WITCH-GIRL!” she heard them behind her.

As she shot through the gate, she toppled over something. As she hit the ground, she saw the shape of something furry. It was large and friendly. Alva was a little confused by this furry beast nuzzling her, while she was on the ground. The animal seemed concerned that it had knocked her over. Had she bumped into a real wolf?

“Alva?”

A warm familiar voice of kindness. Alva looked up. She didn't have to look up, to know who it was. There was only one person who said her name like he was hugging it. It was Lukas.

She looked up and saw him, with his tousele of hair the color of bark in winter.

“Sorry,” she said with a smile, as he helped her up. She felt like she had been saying that a lot to him recently.

The boys tore around the corner and saw her with Lukas. The first two stopped immediately, and the others crashed into them. Lukas gave them a hard stare. They pulled themselves together and were shifting from one foot to another, unsure if they would still pursue or not. They all shot Roderick side looks, looking for some type of direction.

Alva looked up at Lukas, who was staring at the boys. It was obvious what was going on. Alva looked down at the large dog. It was Lukas' pet, but right now, he was Lukas's right hand. The dog felt the threat, and his hair was standing up on his back, making him appear larger.

He wasn't growling yet. He simply stood in a stance, waiting. Waiting to see how this was going to pan out and what instructions Lukas was going to give. Alva had a huge urge to hide behind both of them, but she didn't. This wasn't his fight.

This had nothing to do with him. She didn't need saving. She had this under control.

“What’s going on here, Roderick?” Lukas demanded.

Roderick shrugged. He glanced nervously at the dog.

A few moments passed, which felt like hours to Alva. But eventually Roderick slapped the boy closest to him and gave him that sinister smile again. The boys all nodded in unison again. There was that pack mentality, syncing them up.

“Let’s go,” Roderick said. “We can come back another time.” He looked towards Alva. “Hey, Alva!” he said. “Same time tomorrow?”

The boys all giggled.

“Nice dog,” one of the boys said, as they turned.

“I don’t know if I would call Alva ‘nice’” Another said, and they laughed again.

The boys wandered and staggered their way back up to the top field, joking amongst themselves. Roderick turned back, with a look that told Alva everything she needed to know. This wasn't over, and there would be consequences.

“What was that about?” Lukas said, looking at her.

It was the first time he had spoken to her since the dance. She looked up at his green eyes filled with concern, and it angered her. He looked at her as something small and fragile. Something needing protection. She hated the vulnerability that his eyes imposed. It was true, but she didn't like the look. It made her feel vulnerable, and that wasn't the emotion she needed right now.

Alva turned, and relief filled her as she saw her mom turning up at the bottom of the road.

She didn't want this conversation with him. She didn't want him involved. She shrugged him off.

“Bye, Lukas,” she managed to push out, keeping her voice even and detached. She didn’t look back. She wouldn’t. This was the only way to keep him safe from them. And her.

Lukas felt it, like she had punched him. For the second time, he watched her walk off again, without a single look behind. No care, no emotions, nothing.

He could feel the love he had for her, harden into something else.

Chapter 3

It sat with him all afternoon. The coldness. He hadn't done anything wrong. He had gone to the school to walk Bear around the fields. Bear had forgotten about the whole thing and was happy to be chasing sticks and hunt mice in the hedge while his owner was distracted.

The episode hung on his shoulders during supper, as well as when he did his chores. It overshadowed him as he went to bed, to the point that he couldn't fall asleep. He tossed in his bed, with his head heavy with a million questions. Why had she shut him out? He could help her. She could be with him, and then the other boys would leave her alone.

He got up. Bear, who had been sleeping on the mat next to his bed, got up with him. Bear scratched behind his ear with his back foot, and Lukas rubbed it for him. Bear was most pleased. Lukas got up and walked towards the kitchen. Maybe a cup of hot tea would help him sleep or something. As he got to the kitchen, he opened the door so that Bear could go out. Might as well let the dog go pee while he was at it.

He stroked the fire to see if there was still enough heat there to boil some water. Barely. He threw another log on, and smoke started to come off the sides, as the hot coals explored the new material to devour.

There was a shout from outside. Lukas stood up straight and kept quiet. He heard Bear barking. He went to the door and looked out.

“BEAR!” he called.

He was still barking from the gate.

“What’s going on?” he heard his sleepy mom say as she stood in the doorway of her room.

‘I don’t know,’ Lukas said. He went back to the fire to grab a stick to light with the small flame that was in the pit.

“Come on, come on,” Lukas said, as he heard Bear getting more and more frantic outside. The stick caught on fire, and immediately Lukas shot out the door. Some of his sisters were also now creeping out from their rooms to see what Bear was barking at.

As Lukas was engulfed by the darkness, he heard a thwack, and Bear’s barks came to an abrupt end. He then heard what he was dreading, the shrill, distinct whimper of Bear, and then silence. Laughter and whooping filled the air from what could only be boys. Lukas lit the path with his torch and ran to where he had heard Bear’s last noises.

“BEAR!” he shouted again. As he ran down the path, his foot crunched on something. He turned to look down. On the path was a rudimentary arrow, broken by his weight. He lowered his torch to look down. There was another arrow, poorly shot, a few feet away. He kept his torch low as he now made his way more cautiously. Another arrow.

“Bear?” he whispered. Silence.

Then a whimper.

He lifted his torch up to see in that direction. There was a shape on the ground.

“No,” he whispered as he ran to it.

Alva was watching from the darkness. She had also heard Bear barking from next door and had come out, but she didn't bring a torch. She saw just fine in the darkness. And what Lukas couldn't see was that the boys were still there. They were also watching. But unlike her, their hearts weren't breaking. They didn't have tears building up inside, or the guilt that she had. If Lukas hadn't pitched up that afternoon with his dog, the boys wouldn't have done this. They would have continued to bully her instead of taking out their embarrassment on Lukas. But now, Lukas was involved, and Bear had been shot at. In the dark. Unfairly. The fence prevented Bear from attacking his murderers and defending his life. The darkness now hid them from Lukas.

But not from her.

Anger welled up within her very soul. Anger that she had been bottling up within her for a long time. Her one secret of many. She was angry that she was being singled out just because she was different. She had grown up in this village with these boys, and now they were hurting the people she loved. They had played together when they were younger. She looked at Lukas, his face lit up by the fire of the branch that lay next to him. He now had Bear in his arms and was rocking him back and forth talking gently. Bear's white underbelly fur was getting distinctly darker. She wanted to run and hold Lukas, but she wasn't sure if he would let her. She had been so cold to him recently because she didn't know how to tell him who she was, but also she'd realized something else and now... she didn't know where to start the conversation.

One of the boys in the dark couldn't hold it anymore, and there was a giggle that broke through the silence like shattering a million mirrors. It was hurtful, distinct, and the most inappropriate

sound.

Lukas, who was still deeply traumatized by the death of his friend, had forgotten that there was still a danger in the dark. That the murderers were still out there. But the giggle did it. He hadn't caught the sharp hurt of it, but instead took it as a sign that he wasn't alone. He lowered Bear down and slowly curved each finger around the branch again.

"Hello?" he said, hesitatingly. His tone was undecided. He was giving the benefit of the doubt. An opportunity for the voice to belong to someone who hadn't killed his best friend. Silence came back. The opportunity dissolved.

He stood up, grabbing the branch with both hands, and took the stance of defense.

"I know who you are..." he growled into the shadows. "You leave her alone."

Her?

Alva was surprised. Even in this moment, where his companion was lying, dying, at his very feet, Lukas still chose to defend her. His mind was back at her again. He wasn't concerned for himself or upset about what they had done to Bear. Always her.

"We will do what we want!" one of the boys shouted back. More giggling this time.

Enough, Alva thought. She let the anger wash over her. She wasn't the rabbit. She refused to be the rabbit. And she refused to let Lukas, the boy with the kind green eyes, defend her. She loved him. And they were picking on him because of something she did.

Enough.

Something bubbled within her. Courage. Bravery. She didn't quite have enough of it when it was just her, but now. Now she had to look after him.

An arrow shot through the air and landed at Lukas's feet. Lukas jumped back. More laughter. He swiped the branch to try and pin-point where the boys were hiding, but the light couldn't penetrate deep enough into the darkness.

Voices called from the house. His mom was trying to find out what was going on.

Alva stood up. She could see the boys and where they were hiding. She could see everything.

She walked with confidence towards where Lukas was. Her feet were light on the ground. She clapped her hands together. The sound echoed through, and Lukas turned in her direction. She could see the boys, who felt safe in the shadows, bolt upright to look in her direction as well. She had to clap. She had to summon all the energy she could muster. She had to make this one last long enough. She breathed into it and pushed from within her being, outward, through her palms. Her palms faced outwards. The glowing light started slowly, from a transparent field around her. First, a single butterfly left the magical space and came into the realm where they were. It glowed more than the others. It glowed a different shade from the others she had conjured in private. The others were light yellows and spring greens; this one seemed menacing. It shone brighter but there was a darker quality to it. The others came from a place of curiosity and intrigue, whereas this one came from disruption and corruption. It had a purpose of dark objectives. It glowed in a comfortable way with the darkness of the night.

There was a single note of silence as all parties watched the butterfly thread its way to where Bear lay limp on the ground. Lukas watched it. It moved differently from the one he remembered at the dance. It didn't have the same feel to it. It didn't have the same 'Alva' whimsy. As he watched, it

dissolved into his former best friend, a light glow appeared before it disappeared into the fur.

Silence hung, then a laugh.

“Is that all you can do witch-girl!” Roderick’s unmistakable voice broke through. “You come here to save your pretty boyfriend, and all you can do is summon butterflies? You’re pathetic!”

“Come here witch-girl!” The other all started to shout and then chant “witch-girl, witch-girl” with more laughter.

Alva stayed still. Lukas took a step back. He didn’t know what Alva had done, but he knew that she was something special and a lot braver than most people thought. If she had done something, he knew he would have to step back.

His movement made some of the boys go quiet. If Lukas was getting nervous, they wondered if they should, too. Most of the boys didn’t have the same awareness, so they continued to giggle, but not for long.

Bear opened his eyes. They glowed in the dark. He shifted on the ground. Lukas staggered backwards, unsure of what was happening, as Bear’s bones started to crackle and change. He cracked his neck and spine, jerking upward and onto his back legs. He stood up, taller than Lukas, his claws extended out from his paws. The blood-soaked fur stood up all down his back, as his lips peeled back to show his sharp teeth. A dark, somber growl left his throat and traveled through the night, stopping all laughter. It wasn’t the Bear he had known since a puppy, but rather something that seemed to be wearing Bear’s skin.

Lukas continued to stagger backwards, frightened of the beast he used to be comfortable with. He slipped on the fragments of the arrows around him and fell backwards. The branch dropped out of his hand and landed on the grass. The flames licked the

dry blades, and quickly a small fire quickly started. It multiplied and divided through the greenery to find the fence. It found the tail of the beast and set its coat on fire. He took no notice.

Dead and unfeeling, the creature didn't care about the fire dancing now on his tail. He only seemed to have one focus. He walked, disjointed towards the gate. His bones didn't seem to be gliding together as they should, and it created a jerky movement of horror.

As it walked towards the boys, its tail spread the fire. The boys were all backing up now, in the darkness, against the wall. The creature could see them. It kept moving. Eventually, the boys started to tumble over each other and run, but so did the creature.

Lukas got up and ran back to the house to get buckets of water for the fire. As he ran, he thought he heard Alva's voice repeating what she had told him earlier that day.

“Bye, Lukas.”

He stopped to turn and look, but she was gone.

His mother was shrieking at him now to hurry, as were his sisters. He ran up to the house, and they started getting their hands on any containers they could find and pumping water. The neighbors all woke up and started helping out as the fire was roaring and growing through the town.

The flames were moving quickly. A bolt of lightning leaped through the dark sky and everyone jumped. The fire was roaring louder. An intense heat was coming off it, making it difficult to get close with the buckets. People were shouting, and screaming, as buckets and containers were passed down. Everyone got into a line to pass to each other between the well and water pumps, to the fire. Ash was flying in the air, and a red glow reflected in the clouds covering the stars, when a noise came that brought