

Sleight of Hand
Prequel Short Story to the series The Tarot Legacies
By
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Chapter 1

The idea of catapulting herself down the mountain slope into a snowdrift sounded like a better option to Vesta than following her mother one single step further. With any luck she would break a leg and they would have to return home that instant. Of course if she told her mother what she was thinking, Enid would shake her head, as she always did, and say, “You really should write plays with that dramatic imagination.”

Vesta frowned and plodded along behind her mother as she poked into the snow with that long crooked stick of hers. Four pokes for every time she would stop at a spot to rustle something out from under its winter blanket. Another frozen herb or nut would be admired as her mother cradled it in her hand. Then the hunting and prodding continued.

Vesta imagined herself running headlong into the stream they skirted, the freezing water soaking her clothes as she was swept by the powerful current down to the lake in the valley. That would end this pointless monotony, she thought.

“Vesta, look. White sage.” Enid said cupping two curled frozen leaves. “A very rare find in this area. It’s usually too damp.”

“That’s great, mom. Can we go now?” Vesta broke a thin limb from a young fir tree and waved it like a wand at a raven sitting high above her.

Enid turned away and coughed. It echoed off the stone ravine to their left. “Let’s see if we can find some rosemary over by the clearing so we can add it to our potato soup tonight.”

“Potato soup, again?” Vesta stomped her foot. “It’s the third time this week.”

Enid ignored the remark and moved closer to a bush naked of leaves except for a few miserable looking examples clinging to it.

“Here’s what I was hoping to find. Bilberry, and aren’t they hardy? Yes, these will do just fine.”

Vesta poked the tree limb wand through the snow into the ground. “Why don’t you ask those people for money? You make them well with all these herbs you find and they pay you with measly donations or completely weird stuff that we can’t use. They would pay you if you asked.”

Enid looked up from the bilberry bush. Her aquamarine eyes shone like two Indian sapphires and were made all the more prominent due to the fact that Enid was white everywhere else on her body. Her hair, what little she had of it hung like a little cloud on her snow white skin. And when it came to drama, Vesta felt like she inherited a hefty dose from Enid because her mother chose to only wear white clothing to make the ghostly effect even more pronounced.

They’d lived in Crested Butte, Colorado for so long that no one gasped any more when they saw Enid. The townspeople were used to her appearance. They thought she had a special gift with herbal remedies and they came in a steady flow to be healed. It didn’t matter what the malady was, Enid could fix it. Back aches or morning sickness, insomnia or hypertension, she had a concoction for it. And it all came from this mountain area.

Enid took the withered leaves in her hand and slid them into her little woven basket with such a swift effortless motion that it didn’t look like her hand moved at all.

“Mama, why won’t you?”

“Vesta,” Enid said as she began walking. “We have everything we need. What would we do with money?”

Vesta ran to catch up with her mother and began walking in stride.

“We could buy some real food. You’ve never had spaghetti, have you? It’s really good. And the tomato sauce they put on top with grated cheese tastes great.”

“I don’t understand how they can take all the nutrition out of food and sell it to people. That spaghetti isn’t good for your body. There’s nothing in it that will help you in any way. It’s much better to make it at home.”

“Mama, it’s nineteen seventy-two! Everybody buys food already made like that. Except us.”

“I’m not feeding my child empty food. Besides, we buy milk and butter from the store in town. Sometimes cheese. That’s good enough.”

“I’m the only kid in school who’s never been to the Burger Barn.”

“What’s that?”

“Never mind.” Vesta said. “But if we had money I could buy some new clothes.”

“The clothes you make are beautiful. Why would you want something that someone else made?”

“You just don’t get it.” Vesta shook her head.

Enid stopped at a sprawling oak tree. She poked at the snow beside it then reached down grabbing a handful of soggy leaves that were a pale shade of green. Yellow flowers tinged brown on the edges clung to the leaves.

“Lovely, this will give Mr. Jensen a good night’s rest.” She turned to Vesta holding out her hand. “It’s St. John’s wort and it’s frozen but still quite viable.”

“Mama, you know I don’t care about that stuff. I’m glad you make everybody well but I couldn’t care less about the difference between that kind of wort or a toad wart.”

“Some day you might.”

“I seriously doubt it.”

Sunshine pierced the heavy cloud blanket sending golden waves onto the milky landscape. Pinpoints of red glistened nearby.

“Ah, there they are.” Enid stepped through a drift as high as her knees to reach her target. “I remembered a cranberry bush stood close to this old oak, and here it is.” Enid picked the berries one by one. “This is for Mrs. Turnbull’s bladder infection.”

Vesta threw up her hands. “Great. Can we go now?”

The clouds crowded out the sun once again. The temperature dropped and Vesta shivered.

“Mama, please.”

“All right, Vesta, all right. Let’s return.”

Even though Enid stood almost six feet tall her thin frame made her look smaller. Vesta always told her she had bird bones. And while it appeared you could break her in half without much effort, Enid was stronger than most adult men. She moved into step beside Vesta, who smiled for the first time that day.

“I remember when your father had a terrible bladder infection,” Enid began.

“Why are you bringing him up? Who cares what he had.”

“Now Vesta, you wouldn’t say that if you knew him.”

She stopped walking and faced her mother. “But I don’t know him because he left us here on the side of a mountain in the middle of nowhere a long time ago.”

Shaking her head, Enid extended an alabaster-colored arm toward Vesta who pulled away from her.

“As I’ve told you so many times, Cyrus has important business to conduct in other parts of the world.”

“More important than taking care of his wife and daughter even a little bit? In fourteen years I’ve only seen him twice.” Vesta turned around and began walking again. “He could at least send us some money once in a while.”

Enid strode beside her daughter. “I don’t understand what we would do with money.”

“Maybe we could move into a real house that had plumbing and electricity for starters. We might even be able to get a car.”

“I love our home. I thought you did too.”

Vesta’s shoulders drooped and the agitation in her voice disappeared. “I do Mama. It’s just that.” Vesta didn’t finish her sentence. Instead she dragged her stick through the snow as she walked. Enid coughed again sending a crimson drop of blood into her hand. Vesta barely noticed. Enid plunged her fist into a snowdrift pretending to look for an herb but instead cleaned the blood from her palm.

Enid caught up with Vesta and wrapped her long, thin arm around the girl’s waist.

“I’m going to make some peppermint tea to warm you up as soon as we get home. I’ll add a little chamomile too. You can get the fire going and I’ll bring some pesto up from the root cavern. After dinner we’ll read whatever you want. Does that sound good?”

“Sure, Mama.”

Chapter 2

Their little cabin stood in a small clearing at the base of the butte, protected on one side by the mountain and on the other sides by a thick forest of Douglas firs and blue spruce. Casual observers might call it charming but Vesta knew better. It offered bone-chilling winters and stifling summers. The lack of plumbing meant frigid trips to the outhouse and baths in a tub whose water had been heated by an open fire. There was nothing charming about it.

Vesta reached the front door first. She bolted inside to get the fire going. Logs she'd chopped earlier in the day remained stacked in the fireplace. The kindling lay in a basket close to the hearth. Vesta grabbed a long thin stick and set it on fire with a match. She nestled it with other twigs and dry moss among the logs. A spark sprang to life. The moss sizzled and the twigs began to pop.

Vesta turned toward the cabin door to see Enid walk through it with cheeks so rosy they looked like they had been dabbed with beet juice. She gasped. "Mama, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." Enid moved into the corner of the room that held the kitchen. "I just need some tea." She stood in front of the ancient wooden cabinet that stood as tall as her. Pulling on one of the fist-sized pieces of amber she used as doorknobs, Enid took in harsh gasps of air. Vesta raced from the hearth to her mother's side.

"Something's wrong." Vesta's voice was shrill. "Tell me what it is."

"Oh Vesta," Enid whispered. "Help me to my chair."

Beside the fireplace sat an old stuffed high back chair in all its green and gold plaid glory. Vesta grabbed her mother around her waist and settled her into it.

"Thank you." Enid leaned her head against the back. "Now, how about some tea?"

Vesta knelt beside her chair. "Sure, Mama. What would you like?"

"Go to my cabinet and I'll tell you what to get."

Enid's medicine cabinet was a thing of mystery to Vesta. Herbs, potions and powders were crowded on every shelf. Jars sealed tight, cheesecloth wrapped around little bits of leaves

and berries, and handmade wooden boxes filled to the brim with concoctions held secrets she never wanted to know. She approached it with caution. The only thing she liked were the giant knobs of amber. It felt good to touch them. They reminded her of Enid and something else that was so far away in her memory that she couldn't quite gasp it, but something pleasant and comfortable.

Vesta swung a door open. The flood of odors smacked her in the face. She smelled the earth and the trees from a summer's walk, and spices they gathered during the harvest. Some of the smells tickled her nose while others assaulted it. She sneezed and rubbed her nose.

"Okay, what am I looking for?"

"On the second to the top shelf on the far left is a jar with small green dried leaves."

Vesta looked where her mother directed.

"Mama, all of these jars have small green dried leaves."

Enid coughed and Vesta saw the dark red dot appear in her mother's palm. Vesta's eyes flashed with terror.

"Vesta, focus." Enid said in a calm voice leveling her gaze. "The jar says lungwort on it."

The heat rose in Vesta's body. Her eyes scanned the shelf in panic. "Found it." She pulled the jar out.

"Now," Enid said. "Get the jar next to it that says oregano."

"Got it." Vesta turned around to see her mother's cheeks as red as the bloodstain in her hand.

"Mama please tell me what's going on."

Enid closed her eyes. "I have a respiratory infection. Nothing to worry about. Will you turn the heat on under the kettle?"

Vesta filled the black kettle with spring water from the large crockery vessel sitting on the counter. She took a teacup from the wooden shelves by the sink and filled the tea strainer with a mixture of the herbs. When the water boiled she poured the water through the strainer into the cup. A pungent odor filled the kitchen.

With measured steps Vesta approached her mother whose eyes remained closed. She touched her hand. It was colder than the frozen pond near their cabin. An image of Enid laying on her bed popped into Vesta's mind. The bleached white appearance lying so still reminded Vesta

of pictures she'd seen of effigies depicting medieval queens. Museums held their marble likenesses. No life, stone cold. Vesta's heart thumped hard in her chest.

"Mama!" She shook her mother's hand. "Mama, can you hear me?"

Enid opened her eyes half way and whispered. "You need to call Cyrus."

"No! I can take care of you. I'll run to town and get the doctor."

Enid's icicle fingers gripped Vesta's wrist. "You must do as I say. Go call him. Tell him to come here. Then return and you'll make a poultice for me. I do not need a doctor. I know what to do."

"But Mama," Vesta said.

"Don't argue with me Vesta Claire Beauvais. Do as I say. Get his phone number from the bottom drawer in the kitchen."

When Enid invoked Vesta's full name, she knew there was no point arguing any further. Grabbing the warm teacup she guided Enid's fingers around it. The worn patchwork blanket from Enid's bed Vesta tucked around her ashen body. She kissed her mother's scarlet cheek, found the piece of folded paper with the phone number and ran out the door.

Even in good weather it took twenty minutes at a decent run to get into the town of Crested Butte. In the middle of February at night with snowdrifts higher than their cabin, it would take longer. At least the stars were out along with a stunning watermelon moon. Vesta calmed herself as she ran by recalling the first time she ever used that name. During the summer months she and Enid would sit outside staring at the nighttime sky. A million stars paraded over their heads while Enid pointed out constellations and telling her stories about each one. The moon seemed to hold a special place in Enid's heart because she spoke about it with such love. The first people in the Americas had names for the full moons of each month, she said. The hunter moon, the worm moon and the strawberry moon stuck in Vesta's mind. One night when the silver goddess, as Enid called it, appeared just less than half full Vesta realized it looked like a slice of watermelon, even down to the lunar pockmarks resembling black seeds.

"It does look like that!" Enid had said to her. "How creative of you to see it."

It shone like a beacon for her as she ran past the pond covered with several inches of ice. When she reached the paved road her gait increased even though her lungs hurt like they'd been stung by a hundred bees. Every step brought her closer to the fluorescent lights of the Food King parking lot. Sweat ran down her back under the two sweaters and coat. She pushed harder

knowing that the pay phone was on the far side of the building where they stored the grocery carts. Bolting past the front doors Vesta arrived at her destination.

Heaving with monstrous breaths, her face wet and shiny, she picked up the receiver and dialed zero.

“Yes, I would like to make a collect call and please hurry. It’s an emergency.” Vesta spat out the phone number and told the operator she wanted to speak to Cyrus. She heard a phone ringing on the other end, where, she had no idea. A man answered and the operator told him she had a collect call from Vesta Beauvais. He accepted the call and the operator left the line.

“What’s happened to Enid?”

“She’s sick, really sick. She told me to call you and tell you to come here.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“When will that be so I can tell her?”

“I just told you, as soon as I can.” Cyrus hung up the phone.

Vesta stood with the phone receiver up against her ear. After few moments she realized her mouth was open, poised to say something else, but there was no one to talk to. Her father had hung up the phone without saying when he would arrive, without giving any advice on how to help Enid, without saying goodbye. Why did she think he would be different from any other time she had talked to him? He didn’t care about his wife or her. Who knew if he would show up at all?

Vesta placed the phone receiver back on its cradle. She gazed inside the Food King with its glaring lights and narrow aisles as she hurried past. One of the older kids who was in high school leaned against a cash register waiting for the next customer. Maybe when she turned sixteen Enid would let her work there.

Vesta began a full trot across the parking lot keeping the pace all the way home. Clouds returned in a heavy blanket as she approached the cabin. Smoke puffed through the tiny chimney and a golden-orange glow from the one window assured her that it was still warm inside. Pushing open the door Vesta saw Enid lying on her bed just as she had seen her in her vision an hour earlier. She froze in place and held her breath.

“Mama?”

“Yes,” Enid whispered.

“Are you feeling any better?”

“Is he coming?”

“Yeah, he said he would be here as soon as he could but wouldn’t say when.”

Vesta picked up the huge silver candelabra that always sat by the door. Taking it across the room to the fire she lit all five candles. She knelt beside her mother’s little bed with the light. Spatters of blood speckled her pillow. Vesta cried out.

“Oh, Mama, I’m so scared,” she said putting her head next to her mother.

Enid opened her eyes celestial and blue. “Vesta, you are stronger than you could ever imagine. Call upon the resources of the elders you intuitively know within you. Use them from now on.” She closed her eyes again and fell silent.

A tingling sensation sprung to life in Vesta’s head, between her eyes. It felt like a mild electrical current spinning in a circle. She raised her head and thought for a moment she would describe this unusual feeling to her mother. But one look at the living ghost lying on the bed changed her mind. Enid was the color of the snow outside except for the splatters of red on the palm of her hand and her cheeks. Vesta shuddered but stood up and walked to the herb cabinet. She put her hand on the second amber knob and pulled. A creak sounding deep and hollow followed the door as it swung open. Vesta swallowed hard peering inside.

“Mama, I remember that you have a poultice recipe in here for respiratory problems.”

“Yes.” Enid exhaled a rattling breath. On a middle shelf Vesta saw an old box holding yellowed index cards scribbled with Enid’s unusual handwriting. She grabbed it stirring up aromas of cumin and garlic mingled with cayenne and peppermint. Thumbing through the cards she asked, “Which card do I want?”

“The one that says pneumonia.”

Vesta dropped the box onto the kitchen table. “Pneumonia?” She spun around to face her mother. “Is that what you have?”

“It is.” Enid seemed to glow a ghastly white in the opposite corner of the cabin. Vesta couldn’t tell where her dress ended and her feet began on the bed. Her bare arms disappeared against the white sheets and her sweater.

Vesta’s head began to throb. “You told me people die from that.”

“Did you find the card?”

“Mama, maybe you need to go the hospital in Grand Junction.”

“I can heal better here. It’s not open for discussion. Focus, Vesta.”

Vesta stared at her mother for a moment then began fumbling through the dog-eared cards tainted with age in blotches of brown and dark yellow. She found herbal remedies for migraines, snakebites and kidney stones, ways to induce labor and stop hiccups. Halfway through the stack she found a recipe card for pneumonia.

“I’ve got it. Are all of these ingredients in the cabinet?”

Enid rolled her head to the side to look at Vesta. Her crystal blue eyes shone through the dark cabin like bright stars. “Yes. Everything is in there. Follow it carefully.”

Rivulets of sweat ran down Vesta’s back as she pulled off her coat and one of the sweaters. She stoked the fire to keep her mother warm then brought the candelabra over to the kitchen table beside the cabinet to see labels on the jars and paper bags better. After each herb and tincture had been indentified Vesta took the heavy marble bowl from the shelf along with its pestle. She measured each ingredient with precision. When everything was in the bowl she added water by teaspoonfuls to get the correct consistency. By the time she completed the concoction it smelled like menthol-spiked spaghetti sauce. Vesta wrinkled her nose.

“Mama, it smells truly horrible, but I think it’s ready.”

Enid murmured something Vesta didn’t understand. Looking up from the bowl, she realized that her mother was sound asleep and talking. Vesta wrapped the herbal mixture in cheesecloth and approached Enid. The coarse rasps of breath frightened her. Vesta had never seen her mother sick like this before. White pearls of perspiration clustered on Enid’s forehead. Her bright red cheeks quivered from the painful breaths.

“She doesn’t know. We can’t tell her.” Enid whispered.

“Who doesn’t know?”

Enid’s head lolled to the side toward Vesta, her eyes closed.

“What are you talking about Mama?”

“The spell.”

Vesta drew her head back and started at her mother. “Did you say spell?”

“I understand why she did it.” Enid said then began coughing. A crimson stream issued from the side of her mouth. Vesta grabbed a cloth from a stack of linens and dabbed the blood away. Enid opened her eyes. They looked vacant. “Is it ready?” She asked.

“You mean the poultice? Yes, yes, it’s right here.” Vesta coaxed her mother to lie flat on her back and opened the front of her dress. On her chest Vesta placed the poultice. She could feel

Enid sigh as she closed her eyes again. The nasty aroma of menthol, oregano, lungwort, garlic and other assorted herbs seemed to soothe Enid. The terrifying color in her cheeks began to pale and her body temperature started to decrease.

Vesta exhaled long and slow as she carefully brushed the hair from her mother's face. She stood up to get a quilt for her mother when the cabin door burst open.

Chapter 3

Seven or eight years had passed since Vesta last saw her father, yet she recognized him the second he barged through the door. He didn't say a word but walked to the bedside of Enid and knelt down. He placed his hand on top of her head with a gentle touch holding it there as he closed his eyes. The strangeness of the moment stunned Vesta. She stood mute and motionless watching Cyrus. A pale green glow formed around his hand and grew to envelop Enid's head and then her entire body. Vesta crouched next to her mother to examine the green light. It had no substance and it was neither cool nor warm, but threads of pink webbing ran through it. Almost invisible fibers of pink wove across the green and seemed to pulsate to Enid's heartbeat. Without a moment's hesitation she stuck her index finger into the light. Surges of well-being flowed through her making her want to smile and hug her father. Energy engorged her body with the feeling she could run to town and back without losing her breath. Vesta stared at her finger absorbed by the light for a long moment before pulling it out. A sense of fear and anger rushed into her mind replacing the euphoria. She remembered that she hated Cyrus.

Vesta looked at Enid whose breaths came with ease once again. Her cheeks returned to their normal alabaster color and her open eyes shone with her awareness.

"Mama," Vesta took her hand. The green light with pink webbing faded away. Cyrus opened his eyes.

"I'm fine Vesta." Enid turned her head to look at her husband. "Thank you for coming."

Cyrus kissed her hand.

"You don't have a fever anymore, and your cheeks aren't red." Vesta said.

Enid put her hand around the poultice lying on her chest. "You did an excellent job with this."

Vesta smiled. "I guess it worked."

Cyrus grunted. "It took more than those herbs to fix what ailed your mother."

Vesta cocked her head and looked at her father. "How did you get here so fast? I called you only a couple of hours ago."

"I was in the area."

Vesta's mouth dropped open. "You live around here?"

“I didn’t say that.”

“You were around here but you hadn’t come to see us? To see me and Mama?”

“Vesta,” Cyrus stood up. “Your questions are irrelevant at the moment. We need to get Enid back on her feet.”

“And what was that green light thing you did?”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

“Who says I don’t?”

Enid rustled on her bed. “Vesta don’t concern yourself with all of that now. Will you help me sit up?”

Vesta looked at her mother. “Mama, do you think you should sit up? Maybe just stay in bed for a while. I’ll get some soup for you.”

“I’m feeling much better now. And I’m hungry.” Enid said as she moved her legs across the bed toward the floor. Vesta stood up, grabbed the pillow from her own bed and stacked it with Enid’s pillow so her mother could lie back against the wall in comfort.

Potato soup from the previous night sat chilled in the outdoor rock shelter. Vesta warmed it up over the fire serving it with bread they baked in the wood-fired oven the day before. Enid felt well enough to make tea for them and served Vesta her own special blend to stave off the cold she feared her daughter might catch from all the exposure that day. After dinner Vesta’s eyes drooped. The long day and all the excitement added up to one short trip to the outhouse and a climb into her bed. Enid tucked the old patchwork quilt Vesta had known all her life around her.

“Thank you for taking good care of me today.” Enid sat down on the edge of the bed.

Vesta nuzzled her head against her mother’s arm. “I’m so glad you’re better.” She yawned. “I still want to know what that green light was. And Mama, when you were talking in your sleep you said something about a spell. What were you talking about?”

Enid glanced at Cyrus who sat in her stuffed plaid chair by the fire. She looked back at Vesta smoothing her hair away from her face. “I was delirious. Talking out of control. Don’t worry about anything. Everything is okay.” She leaned down and kissed Vesta on the forehead. “You have sweet dreams and I’ll see you in the morning.” Vesta nodded then fell into one of the deepest sleeps she’d ever had.

The cabin had one window next to the door. It faced east so that when the sun rose on cold mornings light filtered through the pines sending beams of warm light throughout half of the space. Vesta awoke to the fire already burning bright in the fireplace. That was normally her job but not that day. She lay in bed watching the scene in front of her. Enid moved around the kitchen humming. The fact she battled pneumonia the day before but today showed no signs of illness baffled Vesta. How she recovered within such a short time qualified in her mind as a miracle. She knew the green light had something to do with it.

Cyrus sat at the kitchen table by the window. In his hands were some papers he shuffled through as he read. The whole cabin smelled like cinnamon and love. Vesta tucked her head under her quilt and smiled. She didn't hate Cyrus at that moment. It felt nice to have him sitting at their table. Her mother and her father together, and she was their child waking up on this sunlit morning that held the potential for everything wonderful to happen.

"Good morning Vesta." Enid said. "I'm making rolls. Did you sleep well?"

Wiggling her toes to extend her time in bed a moment longer, Vesta said, "I slept really well."

"On your way back inside will you get the preserves?"

"Sure." Vesta climbed out of bed, pulling on her coat and shoes before heading to the outhouse. She grabbed the blueberry and cranberry preserves from the cold storage rock shelter then headed toward the cabin. She paused at the window to get a good look at her father sitting at her kitchen table. She wanted to remember what that looked like.

The wood-fired oven made the cabin extra warm. Vesta set the preserve jars down on the kitchen counter then wrapped her arms around her mother and laid her head on her shoulder. Enid smelled like musk, not the usual herbaceous scents of lavender and lemongrass. It reminded Vesta of the aroma the bucks had during rutting season.

"So you decided to stay with us last night?" Vesta asked looking at Cyrus.

"I did." Cyrus put down his papers and returned Vesta's gaze. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, I can't believe I fell into such a deep sleep. I guess I was really tired after being so worried about Mama."

"She's fine now."

"I guess my poultice really worked." Vesta said looking from Cyrus to Enid and back.

“You did a fine job Vesta.” Enid pulled the rolls from the oven. From the kitchen shelf she pulled down a small pot of honey. “Help me serve the food.”

Vesta carried the preserves and honey to the table setting them beside Cyrus. Being that close to him she realized he smelled the same as Enid; the same musk odor was on him. Vesta paused a moment, wondering if she should say something.

“What is it?” Cyrus asked. Vesta looked at the well-built man sitting at their table with his white button down shirt rolled up at the sleeves and his khaki pants. His eyes, a brilliant shade of blue, showed no emotion, neither curiosity nor hostility. They regarded her waiting for an answer.

“Oh, nothing.” Vesta sat down.

Enid brought the rolls and they began to eat.

Vesta pulled apart her roll letting the warm steam escape as she slathered honey and blueberry on it. She watched Enid and Cyrus looking for clues about what to say next. Neither one spoke. If she wanted to learn anything about this man and what would happen next, she would have to ask.

“So, do you live nearby?”

Cyrus didn’t look up from his meal. “No.”

Vesta adjusted herself in the chair. “Where do you live?”

Cyrus stopped eating and looked at Vesta. “I don’t live anywhere. I spend time in places. A lot of places.”

“What do you do that takes you to all these places?”

Enid looked up at Vesta then back to her plate.

“Work that doesn’t concern you. That you wouldn’t understand.”

A spark of heat fired in Vesta’s belly. “I don’t know, try me. I’m in ninth grade, at the top of my class. I understand a lot.”

Cyrus cleared his throat. “I’m glad you’re so smart and I hope you put it to good use, but I don’t discuss what I do with many people.” Cyrus looked at Enid. “Only the people who need to know.”

Heat spread throughout Vesta’s body. Why did she allow herself to think anything would be different with her father? She knew her cheeks turned red and she wanted to cry but she wouldn’t allow it. She held her breath.

“Cyrus,” Enid said. “I think Vesta is wanting to feel more connected to you.”

“You two have been doing fine on your own. There’s nothing I can add to this situation to make any better.”

Vesta burst into tears. “Really? Is that what you think? You can’t add anything to make it better?” Vesta stood up from the table. “Have you noticed how we live? I bet you have indoor plumbing the places you go.”

“Sometimes.”

“You know what? I don’t care where you go or what you do. I called you last night because Mama asked me to. I thought she was dying.”

“She was.”

Vesta froze. She stared at Cyrus, then at Enid. Her breathing became deeper and faster.

“Is that true?”

Enid nodded. “But I’m fine now.”

“It was because of that green light, right? What was that you put on her?” Vesta felt her cheeks cooling. She slowed her breath.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you are. I saw you spread it over her.”

Enid placed her hand on Vesta’s arm. “Are you sure that’s what you saw? It was dark in here and you were excited.”

“I was right beside you. I touched it with my finger. It had pink webbing running through it.” Vesta paused holding eye contact with her mother. “I know what I saw.”

Enid gave Vesta the smile that always said, “I’m not going to discuss this any further.”

“Energy healing modalities like reiki, if done correctly, can bring outstanding results,” Enid said.

Vesta stamped her foot. “And then when I was mixing up your poultice you began talking in your sleep. You said something about a spell. And you said she doesn’t know and you can’t tell her. Who were you talking about and what spell?”

Enid shot a glance at Cyrus who returned a frustrated look.

“Were you talking about me? Am I cursed?”

Enid stroked Vesta’s arm. “No. You’re not cursed. I must have been talking nonsense. Who knows what I was saying. I don’t remember.”

Vesta looked at Cyrus with as steady a gaze as she could muster. “All my life I wanted a father like the other kids have; to teach me how to swim and ride a bike. Someone I would see out in the audience waiting for me to come on stage. But instead I got you.”

Tears burst from Vesta’s eyes. Her face flushed red again. “I tried to be nice to you even though I knew you didn’t care about me.”

“It seems I’m getting to see one of your dramatic performances now,” Cyrus said.

Vesta shrieked and ran out of the cabin.

The blue sky of the early morning had filled in with a gray blanket of clouds. Vesta wandered down to the pond. A thick layer of ice pressed on top of it. Picking up a fist-sized rock she hurled it at the ice. A pockmark opened where the rock made its first contact. It bounced toward the middle and stopped. She walked to the where the ice began and stomped on the thin sheet covering the most shallow area. It cracked with a satisfying sound. She stomped on another thin layer. Another splintering crack. Vesta exhaled and looked back toward the house. She hated Cyrus. What did she do to him to make him like this toward her? The heat rose in her cheeks again. She shook her head and put her cold fingers across her face. No more tears for him, or anyone.

The wind picked up and without a coat it felt bone chilling. Vesta decided she would return to the cabin and sit on her bed without saying a word to either Cyrus or Enid. She would get out her math book and do some homework. She hoped he would leave soon so life could get back to normal.

One of the peculiar things about their cabin had always been the chimney. When the wind blows from a certain direction and at a certain speed voices inside can be heard outside even when spoken in a hushed manner. Vesta walked up from the pond and heard Enid’s voice sounding more shrill than usual. At first she thought Enid was outside talking to Cyrus but realized she was hearing the chimney effect. Vesta stood still and listened.

“You know what she went through. You can’t blame her,” Enid said.

“She knew how much everyone counted on her. We all have to get over these things and move on.”

“She was always one of the most dedicated. You know that. I understand why she did it. Maybe I would have done the same thing.”

Cyrus raised his voice. “You’re not that selfish. Now she’s useless.”

“We’ll have to wait to see.”

The wind changed directions and the voices stopped. Vesta stared at a raven high up in a fir tree. “What are they talking about? I know it’s about me.” The raven squawked and flew off. “I’m going to find out.” Vesta walked to the front of the cabin and went inside.

Chapter 4

Enid and Cyrus stood by the fireplace and watched Vesta approach.

“I should have worn a coat.” Vesta rubbed her hands together then stretched them out toward the fire. Enid wrapped her arms around her daughter.

“You’re such a strong and capable girl. Everything is fine.”

“Mama, I’m sorry. I got angry because I didn’t understand what was going on.”

“You’ve always been my problem solver.” Enid hugged Vesta then looked at Cyrus. He cleared his throat and shifted his weight.

“And I just wanted you to like me.” Vesta looked up at her father.

“Well, I,” he paused. “You’re my daughter. Of course I care about you.” Vesta smiled to herself. Enid reached out for Cyrus’s arm and gave it a loving squeeze.

“I know that green light was some kind of healing thing. It healed Mama so fast. I’m really glad you knew how to do it.” Vesta looked at her mother. “Is that why you asked me to call him, because you knew he would use that green light?”

Enid looked puzzled like she didn’t know what to say. “It was, um, some energy work that Cyrus learned how to do a long time ago.”

“Will you teach me?” Vesta said looking at Cyrus.

“Teach you?” Cyrus started to laugh. It started in his belly and echoed up through his chest to his throat deep and powerful. Vesta’s eyes shot toward Enid who avoided returning the look.

“I learn really fast. And then if Mama ever gets sick again I can heal her with the green light and we won’t have to call you since you’re always so busy.” Vesta nodded her head as she spoke.

“You hear this?” Cyrus asked Enid. “What do I say?”

Enid’s crystal blue eyes stared at Cyrus. “You know what you must do.”

“She wants to learn,” he said.

Vesta bounced in place holding her mother’s arm around her waist. “I want to learn Mama. I really want to.”

“Vesta, let’s clear the dishes and start our chores.”

“No, Mama. Let him teach me.”

Enid walked to the kitchen table and began picking up the plates. "Cyrus, no."

"Maybe there's hope for the kid after all."

"You can't," Enid said.

"Sure I can."

"You made an oath."

"I can break it. She wants me too."

"No," Enid said. "She doesn't know what she's asking."

Vesta bounced faster in place. "Yes I do. Yes I do."

"No, you don't." Enid walked to Vesta taking her hand. "Listen to me. You don't understand what you're asking for."

"Is it because of the curse?" Vesta asked.

"There is no curse," Enid said.

"It was kind of like a curse," Cyrus said.

Enid's eyes turned glacial blue as she spoke. "There was no curse. You know that. Don't frighten her or put an idea like that into her mind."

"Your mother's correct. It wasn't a curse."

"But it was a spell," Vesta said. "I'm right, aren't I? Someone put a spell on me." Her eyes twinkled and her breaths came fast and light.

Enid and Cyrus stared at each other.

"I knew it. Who was it? Is that why I know about things before they happen sometimes?"

Vesta squeezed Enid's hand. "I saw you laying in your bed yesterday before you ever did it. It was the exact thing I saw later but I saw it before it happened."

Cyrus nodded his head.

"And is that why I feel something spinning between my eyes sometimes? Like a top, right here." She put her finger at the spot above her nose in between her eyebrows.

"That's your power, girl," Cyrus said in a soft voice. "That's your special gift."

Enid shook her head. "Cyrus, don't. You made an oath. She wanted it this way."

"Mama, I want to know about the spell and how to heal with the green light. Please."

"You made us take an oath Vesta. And you said even if you ask to know, not to tell you."

Enid's hand trembled on Vesta's. She became even paler, if that was possible.

"Oh Mama, it's going to be okay. I want to know."

“Enid,” Cyrus said taking his wife by the arm and leading her to the chair by the fire. “Sit down and rest. Vesta, make your mother a cup of tea.”

“Of course.” Vesta stepped into the kitchen. “Lungwort or chamomile maybe?” She almost sang out the words.

“Chamomile please.” Enid leaned her head against the back of the chair and closed her eyes.

“So Cyrus, or Dad, what do I call you by the way?” Vesta said as she prepared the tea.

“Cyrus is fine.”

“Okay Cyrus.” Vesta’s heart beat fast and words flew at a rapid pace out of her mouth. “Tell me about the spell.”

Cyrus stared at Enid for a long moment. Enid shook her head in slow motion. “She’s strong Enid, just like you said. And she wants to know. And we need her.”

“Tell me!” Vesta shrieked as she poured hot water into a teacup.

“Well.” He moved closer to the kitchen. “It happened like this, you put a spell on yourself in the last life to forget who you are in this life.”

Vesta put the kettle down on the stove. Her eyes seemed to expand to twice their size as she listened to Cyrus speak.

“You served a very important position in our tribe, and something happened that upset you.” Cyrus looked toward Enid then back to Vesta. “A lot.”

Vesta’s gaze moved from Cyrus to the fire. She stood staring at it. His words still reached her ears but images began to rush through her mind transporting her to a place she didn’t recognize.

“We haven’t had your valuable gifts in this life because of the spell.”

Vesta saw a yellow field that stretched in every direction. She grabbed someone by the arm, pulling them through the knee-high crops. They were screaming. She was screaming. Cyrus’s voice continued.

“I can help you regain your gifts, so can Enid.”

Vesta looked down at her hands. Blood covered them, but it wasn’t hers. Inside the cabin on the side of the mountain in Crested Butte Vesta began to scream. She sunk to the floor in the kitchen. She hit her fists against her head. Tears poured down her face.

Cyrus froze as Enid jumped to her feet running to Vesta. "I'm here. It's Mama. It's okay. Come back to me. I'm here."

Vesta heard Enid's voice in a far off corner of her mind. A blurry vision of a little cabin with Enid crouched beside her came into focus. The thread of Enid's voice pulled her closer to the room. She remembered the cabin interior but she also recognized the sprawling wheat field. Both visions occupied her consciousness and both felt real to her. They bumped into each other scattering elements across space-time. The field stood inside the cabin, knee-high wheat grew next to their beds and in the kitchen. Vesta saw the blood on her hands again. A thunderous noise causing the ground to shake jerked her attention back to the yellow field with the bright blue sky overheard. The cabin disappeared. She dove into a row of wheat and coiled herself into a tight ball. Someone started screaming as the wheat flattened beside her. Vesta realized she was the one screaming. Her breath came fast and hard. Then everything stopped. She slumped next to the wall in the kitchen and fell lifeless.

"Cyrus!" Enid grabbed Vesta and laid her down on the floor. Cyrus jumped beside her. He stared at his daughter for a moment then closed his eyes. Hovering his hands above her head a pale green light manifested from them. It moved like a curtain first around her head then down the length of her body. A pulsating web of slender pink threads emerged from the green and covered the illuminated shroud. Vesta lay entombed in the light. Her tears vanished as well as the blood on her hands. Enid exhaled and leaned against the wall. Cyrus held his position for several minutes. The cabin went silent except for the occasional pop of a log in the fireplace.

With care Cyrus pulled his hands away from Vesta and opened his eyes. The green light with the pink webbing dissipated. He looked at Enid who nodded at him. Cyrus stood up then bent over and picked up Vesta. Enid led the way to her bed and covered her with a quilt. She sat down and stroked her forehead.

"Will you get some mint from the cabinet?"

"What kind?"

"It doesn't matter. Any will do."

Cyrus fumbled through the rows of jars for a few moments before retrieving some peppermint leaves in a small paper bag. He handed them to Enid who crunched them in the palm of her hand. The bright aroma flared up and Enid waved it under Vesta's nose.

“Vesta,” Enid said. “Open your eyes. It’s time to wake up.” She rubbed the mint again and held it close for Vesta to smell. The flutter of an eyelash began, then the other signaling Vesta’s return. Turning her head to face her mother she opened her eyes.

“My head hurts.”

“I’ll make some tea that will take the hurt away.” Enid patted Vesta’s hand and headed for the kitchen. Vesta sat up looking around the cabin. When her eyes landed on Cyrus standing by the fireplace she stopped.

“You said I put a spell on myself to forget who I was in the last life. Didn’t you?”

Cyrus gave no response.

“That’s what you said. I remember. You said I had special gifts and had an important position in our tribe. And that you could teach me those gifts again.”

“Vesta,” Enid said. “I think that’s enough talk right now for all of us.” She pulled an old box from her cabinet and slid the top off.

“No. I want to know what he meant.”

“It’s time for me to go,” Cyrus said. He picked up his coat.

“Wait. You can’t just leave. Why did I put a spell on myself? What are my special gifts? I hope it’s the green light. Did you put the green light on me when I started screaming?” Vesta stopped talking. She looked around the room. “And this room was filled with wheat like in a field.”

Enid poured hot water from the kettle into a large mug.

“And I was in the field.” Vesta’s eyes stared into empty space. Enid hurried over to Vesta’s bed.

“Stop talking. Look at me.” Enid snapped her words. Vesta obeyed. “This is your life now.” Enid said stroking her arm. “There is no other place for you but here.”

“But what about,” Vesta began. Enid held up a finger and shook her head.

“No.” She said and handed the mug to Vesta. “It’s still hot but start sipping this tea. It will help.” Vesta took the mug and blew on the steaming liquid to cool it down.

Cyrus walked to the door.

“Don’t leave. I want you to tell me more.”

“No you don’t. I thought you might be ready, but you aren’t.”

“I’m ready.” Vesta’s voice filled with excitement.

“You’re not ready daughter,” Enid said.

“And you know all about it too?” Vesta pushed her legs over the side of the bed rattling her feet on the floor. “Tell me why I cast a spell on myself.”

“You’re not ready. Drink your tea.”

“If I drink my tea, will you explain a little bit about the green light?” Vesta put the cup to her lips and sipped. “This tastes like licorice. No. Mushrooms.”

“You’ve always had a palate that can identify ingredients. That’s a sign of a good healer.”

Vesta smiled. “I love you Mama.”

“I love you Vesta.”

Vesta yawned. Enid plumped her pillow.

“Now, lie back and rest.” Enid pulled the quilt over her. She leaned in kissing Vesta on the forehead. “Sweet dreams.”

Chapter 5

When Vesta awoke it was dark except for the bright flicker of the fireplace. The cabin felt warm and it smelled great. Enid had roasted winter vegetables and added curry with a little cumin to them. Pulling the quilt tight around her, Vesta got out of bed and walked toward the kitchen. Enid looked up from the pile of dough she was kneading.

“How was your sleep?”

“Good. Really good. I don’t even remember going to bed after I stoked the fire.”

“You must get your homework finished after dinner because you have school tomorrow.”

Vesta watched Enid wrestle with the dough as she wrestled with what Enid had said.

“I don’t have school on Sunday.”

“Tomorrow is Monday.”

“No it’s not.”

“It is. You’ve been asleep for a while.”

Vesta looked around the cabin. “This is Sunday night?”

Enid nodded.

“And I’ve been asleep since Saturday night?”

Enid paused. “You had a nice long rest. I think you needed it. Would you agree?”

“Am I sick?”

“No. I think you’re much better now.”