

Rookie

Twiceborn

Part 1

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No man knows till he has suffered from the night how sweet and dear to his heart and eye the morning can be.

(Dracula (1897) – Bram Stoker)

Whenever ye have need of anything, once in the month, and better it be when the moon is full, ye shall assemble in some secret place and adore the spirit of Me who am Queen of all Witcheries and magics. There ye shall assemble, ye who are fain to learn all sorcery, yet have not won its deepest secrets. To these will I teach things that are yet unknown. And ye shall be free from slavery, and as a sign that ye be really free, ye shall be naked in your rites, both men and women, and ye shall dance, sing, feast, make music, and love, all in my praise.

(Gardnerian Book of Shadows (1949) – Gerald Gardner)

Prologue

Damp mist stretches for miles ahead of me. Full of despair I walk on without having any clue as to where the edge of the forest is. After what feels like eternity, I stop and lean against the grooved trunk of an old green maple tree. My tired head touches the bark, and the sap from an old tree wound makes my hair sticky. I hear a rustling noise behind me, I quickly look around the trunk, but because of the dense mist I can see only two yards in front of me. As I'm trying to suppress my panting, I crawl against the tree. Paralysed by fear I hear beechnuts crack under somebody's step. I know he's here. He means to make me suffer. There's no point in resisting. I squeeze my eyelids shut as hard as I can. While I prepare myself for what is going to happen, my body freezes. When the hand finally grabs me, I shriek.

Chapter 1

The people of our village are sweltering in the heat of the sun on this Friday afternoon. Its scorching rays beat down remorselessly, hitting the old Minster which lies at the heart of ancient fertile farmlands. The place has always consisted of two hamlets, Roseminster and Abbeyminster. They are so small that when they drew up maps of the place the cartographer did not take the trouble to separate the villages. To this day, it still says ‘Minster’ on the maps, which resulted in an eternal bond between the villages. Roseminster is the larger of the two. We go to school there. To the north east is Abbeyminster, where Catherine and I live. Our village has nothing more than a church, some old-fashioned pubs and a few village houses that nestle on and around the Abbeyminster church hill. It is an old corner of Europe in which the years, decades and centuries have passed peaceably without dramatic change. The place is so small as to almost go unnoticed, but the inhabitants have traditionally been individualistic in their own way, and well aware of their good fortune to live in near-obscurity. In the warm summer months, they enjoy a refreshing dive from the Old Sheep bridge into the river that twists above the village, and in the afternoon they play on the steps of the old church hill or take a trip to search out the shade of the Old Woodlands that extend over 2,500 acres. Many unprepared wanderers have got lost there. During the sultry summer nights, it is a hive of insects, nocturnal hunters and other forms of life. Nevertheless, during the first hour of the day, the flora is silenced by a chill that falls as the damp morning approaches.

“Come on, Ellie. We've only got one exam to go before the year's over,” Catherine says in a comforting way. Panting with the heat, we loaf about the streets of Roseminster.

“I know, but I don't actually care that much. To be honest, I wouldn't mind starting this year over again.”

“What?” Catherine says in disbelief.

“That’s right,” I reply. The past few weeks I’ve tried to put off thinking about the holidays for as long as possible. The prospect of the long, lonely days that await me in the coming months kept me awake last night. I’ve never had many friends. It was only last year that Catherine managed to break through the wall I had built around myself. She knits her brow. When she stares at me with that intimidating look, I feel almost compelled to explain myself and open up to her. She’s managed to get a lot of information out of me that way in the past few months. I let out a deep sigh.

“I’m just not looking forward to the holidays. And before you say anything, let me tell you what this holiday will be like: it’ll consist of playing football in the garden every day for a few hours with Ine until she complains to Aunt Erica about something or other I did wrong, reading a book on the porch, and watching Gran make soup. That’s it,” I say unhappily. “That’s been my summer holidays the past few years. So, you have to admit, you wouldn’t want to trade places with me for the world. And even if you were to offer, I’d refuse because I like you too much.”

Catherine’s face shows the hint of a suppressed smile. She tries her best to empathise because she can read from my face how awful I feel about the whole situation.

“Yeah, reading a book and hanging out in the kitchen, that I can handle. But spending time with that boring cousin of yours, that’s where I’d have to draw the line.”

The village market is filled with teenagers hurrying to catch their bus, on their way to cram for the next exam, or to take a hot soak with music playing in the background.

I am definitely planning to do the latter.

“I don’t know if I can, but... I would have to ask Eric,” Catherine thinks out loud.

“What would you have to ask?”

“I’m going to a large gathering of an association in the village Friday evening. It will be an important evening for me, so I’d actually feel more at ease if you were there. And that way you’ll immediately have something to do at the beginning of the summer holiday. What do you think?” she asks me.

“What kind of gathering?” Catherine is in that mood again where she speaks with vague terms.

“Now don’t you dare laugh. It’s a group that practises its own religion, based on the faith that people of this region used to follow, but that was driven out by Christianity,” Catherine looks at me hesitantly.

“You’re going to a gathering of a pagan sect?” I say bluntly.

“A sect? Not at all, they’re not criminals. It’s just a group of people who believe in alternatives to the things that the church imposes on us. There’s nothing illegal about that, right? The members try to breathe new life into the original faith by regularly coming together at Sabbath festivals. I know it sounds dreamy, but it’s not. The parties are legendary by the way. My brother can’t stop talking about them when we’re watching television in his room. Even so, he never offers to take me with him,” Catherine says bitterly. “But that’s changing now. On Friday, I’m finally allowed to go, straight off to the Midsummer night party. On that night, the rookies are officially recognised.” I look at her questioningly. “They are apprentices – in the old language they are also called ‘rough stones’,” she says in an off-hand way. I have never heard Catherine give such a long and serious explanation. This must be really important to her.

“I’d love to become a rookie, but you have to be accepted by the high priestess. Eric says that I can be more or less certain of being accepted because he’s such an exemplary member,” she continues. “And of course because they know I’d love to be initiated.”

“So you are joining anyway?” I ask suspiciously.

“I don’t know yet. Every rookie has to undergo training with the high priestess. Afterwards you’ll be initiated and only then are you allowed to take part in the rituals and things like that.”

“Okay, I think that I’m starting to understand what you’re talking about. But it still sounds like a sect to me. And you want me to go with you to the gathering?”

“Yes. But don’t let your imagination run riot. It’s mostly about celebrating the old anniversaries together,” she says to me while we’re ambling in front of the police station. I would rather walk a

bit faster. At this rate, we will not be home before the start of my favourite radio show and I do not want to miss it; and I want to have that soak this afternoon. “Besides, you don’t have to look so suspicious, Ellie. I’m absolutely not the only person of the village who wants to join the group.” I was not looking suspicious at all. She must have mistaken my squinting for suspicion, but I was looking at the church tower of Abbeyminster one mile away. Though I have to admit that suspicion and scepticism were playing on my mind. “Linda will be appointed as a rookie that evening as well, but she has been allowed to take part in the activities of the coven for years already.” “Fuzzy Linda? She’s not at all the social type that loves going to parties,” I answer in surprise. Her alien behaviour may be explained by her weird hobby, though. Linda has been wearing small round glasses since kindergarten. She is probably the least accessible person on earth. She gives the impression of being in a trance for days as if her spirit were in a parallel world, while her body is left sitting at a school desk. “Fuzzy Linda’s parents have been members of the group for decades. Actually, they would be able to found their own group because they have both been initiated as high priest and high priestess already. But members tend not to leave and start their own coven. That is what makes this group different from others. For hundreds of years they have stuck together like a close-knit family. There are sixty to seventy members, but it hardly ever happens that they’re all together at once, though everyone tries their best to attend the annual Midsummernight gathering,” Catherine continues eagerly. She is obviously enthralled.

“Fuzzy Linda’ step- cousin, Robin, you might know him from school. He’s one year ahead of us. On Friday he’ll also sign up for the lessons. Robin is way better- looking than his cousin, by the way. But you’ll see for yourself if you come along. Besides, his sister Hannah is high priestess of the coven. She’s thirteen years older than him, thirteen! It might take us more than a while to get to that level.”

“Err, I don’t know, Catherine. It sounds very private, the kind of place where strangers aren’t allowed. I don’t know anyone there, except for you. I’m sure I would feel very uncomfortable being there. On top of that, I think Auntie Erika would laugh at me if she found out about my new summer hobby.” Catherine looks at me very disappointed.

“I just don’t know what to think of it,” I admit.

“Hey girls, no detours on your way home! And definitely don’t pass the churchyard where all the bad boys are hanging around,” a tall, blonde guy shouts from the marketplace, trying to tease us. I feel a small jolt going through me as I see him swing his long, muscled leg over his bike before he rides away standing up. “Talk about the devil!” Catherine shouts to him. “Why do brothers always think we’re checking out boys, while they have the right to say something about that, whereas it’s usually them checking out girls?”

“You’ve actually never introduced him before. I thought he went to another school?” Him I would have remembered, I thought to myself.

“He’s usually very good at going unnoticed when he’s with his stinking friends. Eric’s not waiting for a few giggling fifteen-year-old girls to come say hi, while he’s smoking weed with his friends by the trees on the car park. As a sixth-former he has a reputation to maintain. That’s something he’s told me loud and clear on numerous occasions. But at home he acts completely differently. I’ve not a bad word to say about him then. And he would never touch those cancer sticks there. That’s just something he does to get attention from the ‘right’ girls.”

“Well, to get back to what you were saying earlier... I’ll go with you. I’m only doing it because I’m worried about you. But I’m telling you right now, I’ll only do it this once. All right?” I say. “I knew you were going to say yes!” Catherine shouts enthusiastically. She pulls me by the arm to the old railway cutting leading to Abbeyminster, our native village with its forested hills and clear streams.

“I’m already looking forward to it,” says Catherine excitedly. “We still have some preparing to do, though.”

“Okay,” I say laughing, “but first we have to pass our maths exam on Monday.”

Catherine moans and drops her hands disheartened by her sides. “This is going to be the longest weekend of the year.”