

Winter Solstice 2021

Solstice Sweet Sixteen

by Sipora Coffelt

I crouched, hiding behind the new concrete building that housed the I-80 rest stop. Three rats hovered nearby. From here, I looked out on a stretch of I-80 with its speeding cars and lumbering trucks. No one stopped, letting me explore the telephones and the curious bags and packages inside a square box with the word “Vending” written across the top.

The year—1977—my best friend, Allegra, and I broke the rules and sneaked away to watch it being built. We stayed safe behind the trees of the invisible forest. But she refused to come with me now.

“Humans,” she said, as if that answered all my arguments.

Mom had sent me to the peach orchard to check for damaged trees, making it easy enough to slip away. She never thought I’d slink outside my hidden, female-only hometown of Holiday, where I could depend on staying safe from the outside world.

Wards protected Holiday from the cities of Lincoln and Nebraska, and also the farm towns in between. Once the rest stop construction began, all Holiday’s families devised new rituals to strengthen the magic that kept us isolated.

Contact with humans is strictly forbidden, and they can’t see the trees unless we let them. But we’ve always been able to see humans as they come and go. The rest stop gives curious witches like me glimpses of the outside world.

Trouble was, the more I saw, the more curious I became until Mom, perceiving my thoughts, said out of the blue, “It’s fine for Allegra to leave. She has sisters. But I will

detest being the last Parker in Holiday.” Then she swatted me, not hard, and added, “I’ll curse you forever, Piper, if you leave.”

Sometimes, I hated my mom.

Tomorrow, I’d have to promise to stay. The winter solstice was my sixteenth birthday, the age thought to be the sweetest. Sweet Sixteen. Five of us had been born of the same father, all near the winter solstice, sixteen years ago. But the ceremony wasn’t all feasting and presents. Mom expected me to promise to stay in Holiday forever.

“But I want to leave,” I’d said to Allegra, and she’d answered, “Just lie.”

Plus, this year had turned propitious—or did I mean ominous? The outside world had erupted in turmoil. Bombings and blizzards. Hostages and hijackers. We were isolated but not ignorant of world events, so even Holiday buzzed with the more or less local news of the Farm Strike and the Tractorcade. Until things calmed, the Elders ordered everyone away from the forest. Mom regarded me askance and threatened horrific retribution for disobedience.

Still, the outside world drew me. Safety would never be enough. I was desperate to learn more. I wanted to view television. Take a long hot shower instead of our three-minutes-and-out, barely warm ones. Talk to someone on the telephone. Read a romance novel written today and not ten years ago.

So here I sat, beyond the forbidden forest, crouched behind the freezing concrete building, waiting, watching, wondering. The rats told me to run off home, but I ignored them.

Rats have always talked to me in their limited way, and I liked to pay attention. They saw a lot of what went on. Mom didn’t share my point of view.

“A mischief is what they’re called and what they are,” she’d say. “Destructive, disease-ridden creatures.”

Just about to give up, finally, in late afternoon came my payoff. Three tractors clambered their slow way, traveling east. They lumbered off the highway down the rest stop ramp and parked.

A farmer in quilted coveralls and a dirty Carhartt jacket climbed down from one of the tractors. A middle-aged woman, probably his wife, drove the second tractor. She had scanty hair and a mean face. The third was a boy about my age, fifteen or sixteen, who jumped off his perch and announced, “Whew. I’m gonna pee my pants.”

He stomped toward the Men’s, scowling, his pimply face beet red.

Males. My ancestors founded Holiday to avoid contact with men. Holiday witches taught that men were only good for one thing and should never otherwise be trusted. After all, men burned witches.

Allegra and I agreed. The men who built the rest stop had nasty ways. They scratched and picked their noses and shouted curses and slapped one another. A couple of them smoked stinky tobacco and once or twice, Allegra said she smelled marijuana. But they didn’t seem dangerous.

I refused to chance contact and backed up to hide in the wall’s shadow. Just my luck, the kid noticed one of the female rats and let out a girly scream. The doe screamed back, and I hissed at her. My mistake.

“Hey,” called the kid. “Lookee. Here’s a girl.”

Of course, the mean woman hurried over. “You all right?” she asked before scrutinizing me from the crown of reddish-brown braids circling my head to my woolen cloak and rubber-shod feet. Her widened eyes and raised eyebrows said it all. We didn’t buy our clothes from Sears and Roebuck or Macy’s. This human had probably never seen anything like what I wore. Every stitch was handsewn and even my boots were cobbled by hand.

After giving me the once-over, she came at me like a prairie storm, kicking the smallest rat out of her way. “Need help?” Peering over her shoulder, she shouted, “Call 911.”

My heart pounded. I couldn’t tell her my home was the town of Holiday beyond a forest she couldn’t see. Here was the comeuppance Mom promised me. I’d been caught by humans. I took a breath to slow my pounding heart. Panic would defeat me.

“What’s your name, girl?” She grabbed my arm and shook me.

I glared at her hand on my arm before pulling away. “What’s yours?” I gave her my best version of Mom’s most disagreeable look and added a mental thrust for her honest response.

“Nancy Petersen,” she said without hesitation. Her chin jiggled a bit, maybe surprised she had answered, but she went on. “And that there’s m’husband John. The boy what found you is Kenny.” She—Nancy—shook herself until her blank-eyed stare vanished, replaced by a devious look. “And you are?”

“Piper.” I raised my head and shouted to stop John from banging on the pay phone. Lucky for me, the phone must not have worked. “Don’t bother calling 911.”

“What’s going on with you then? Why are you here? Where’s your car? Are you even old enough to drive?” Nancy didn’t wait for answers.

When she ran out of questions, I straightened to full height and stared down my nose. At fifteen, I was taller than she, and I’d bet anything I was taller than Kenny. Allegra’s tall, and she does that sometimes to me when she thinks I’m out of line.

“Why I’m here is none of your business. After Kenny pees, you should be on your way.” Infusing my voice with even more force, I walked off, heading toward the back of the toilets, hoping to skulk into the tree line without making the forest visible to these humans.

But Nancy chased after me. “We can’t just leave you here. You’d better come with us.”

Here was trouble. The Elders had decreed that the outside world had come too close. If I crossed the tree line, these humans might see the forest and follow me to Holiday.

Mom and the other Elders would grab at the chance for powerful blood magic. The family of three—the bossy mother, the quiet man, the pimply boy—would die, and it would be my fault. I’d have a blot on my Akashic record, a dark karmic stain added to whatever punishments Mom devised. No thank you.

But worse than that. Mom had given an ominous warning when she said to stay away from the forest. If a single human saw the trees and walked the magical path to Holiday without an invitation, it would break the magic that kept us safe. Others must surely follow.

“All right,” I said, positive I’d find a way to escape later. I needed a plan and hoped to think of one before too much time passed.

The rats rustled behind me, scurrying toward their hidey-hole near the tree line. Clouds covered the sinking sun. Snow spit down, fat flakes like frozen cloud dust, but the cold, still air told me it wouldn’t amount to anything much.

After following Nancy to the tractors, I looked up, uncertain what to do next.

“She can ride with me,” said Kenny.

No way would I travel with any male. Nancy pursed her lips.

“Girls together, and that’s that.” She bent down from her perch on the tractor seat, offering me a hand. I took it and, with one foot on the metal side, hoisted myself to stand in front of her.

“Sit down.” She patted one bony knee. “Hold on to the wheel but don’t be trying to steer.”

I didn’t want to perch on her knee. It felt weird, and I scooted forward so far, I banged my head on the roll bar. Nancy put one arm around my waist before starting the engine. The ground beneath us rumbled. I gripped the wheel, knuckles white. We crawled onto the shoulder of I-80, where cars passed at lightning speed.

I twitched, and Nancy slapped me on my thigh.

“Don’t wiggle,” she said. “You’ll roll us.”

“Stop and I’ll get off.”

But Nancy took her hand off the wheel and smacked me on the shoulder.

It didn’t hurt, but she was way too handsy, and it creeped me out. The little hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up while my mind spun with what-ifs. What if I spun the wheel and rocked the tractor onto its side? What if I waved and screamed and hoped a human in one of those speeding cars heard me? What if I jumped off?

Every time that thought came to mind, Nancy’s arm tightened around my middle.

“Don’t jump,” she said. “You’ll break your neck.”

I craned my head to look for an aura. She had none, meaning she was wholly human, but something about her was loathsome and off-putting. I needed to figure out what made her that way.

Still, the thought of jumping stayed with me. I’d never been on a tractor before and didn’t know if I’d break my neck or arm or leg. Bending my neck to peer at the ground, it seemed a long way down. Using air as a cushion—but then what? Would Nancy chase after me? She’d beat me back to the rest stop for sure.

Plus, Mom was always saying, “Be sparing with magic. Without fail, the cost is higher than you think.” Idiot me, if I used magic to escape these humans, I might well stockpile enough debt for a lifetime.

After half an hour of a slow, precarious ride and holding my breath for what seemed like the whole time, I inhaled and asked, “How much longer?”

“Are we there yet?” she mocked in a falsetto. “Almost.” A few minutes later, she turned off the Interstate shoulder, and our tractor parade rocked down a perilous dirt road—more like a trail—bumping into potholes and pitching from side to side.

My teeth chattered and not from cold. Still, I was grateful when a shabby clapboard farmhouse came into view. I wondered if Mom had missed me yet. She’d beat me for sure, or worse, block my magic for a week when she found me. But nothing was worse than the shame chilling me to the bone.

Fat-headed Piper. I should’ve known better than to go to the rest stop.



Inside, the house was colder than a witch-hunter’s heart. John started a miserly fire while Kenny went for more firewood. Nancy clung to me like a limpet.

“Where’s the toilet?” I asked, and she pointed to the yard. I went out the back door where wind whistled through the trees surrounding the ramshackle privy.

Yep. An outhouse. They had a well but no running water. Light came solely from candles and a couple of blackened oil lamps because no electricity. Their farm lay in the middle of nowhere between Eagle and Lincoln, meaning they lived like it was the eighteenth century.

Hel's Night, even my hometown of Holiday had more utilities than this. I wanted to go home now, but I didn't want to walk that long, cold, dark way.

It scared me enough to run, but Nancy surveyed me from a window—I saw the curtains flicker. Kenny came from around the corner and stood near, grinning like he knew something I didn't. With a huge sigh, I closed the rickety outhouse door on him.

Then wished I hadn't. The reek emanating from inside was indescribable. Something must've died in there. A small mischief of rats squeaked as I emerged, still holding my nose. Kenny was gone.

"Stinks, don't it?" I asked them. They were all small females. I crouched down to look into their bulging little eyes. One with pink eyes sat on my foot. "Where's your buck? You gals safe without him?"

A strident scream blared by my ear and a broom hit me in the back.

"Nasty, dreadful creatures." Nancy was the one screeching. "Always hanging around the outhouse, filthy critters." She went on and on, making me sorry I hadn't tried to run. Being here didn't feel safe. Not for those poor rats. Not for me.

Back inside, it was supper time. Kenny set the table with bowls, spoons, and mugs. Nancy pulled a cast-iron cauldron off the wood-burning stove's back burner and ladled what looked like bean soup into the bowls. Tea went into the mugs. Thirsty, I took a sip, earning a frown from both Nancy and John.

"Grace first," said Nancy.

I wanted to tell her the tea wasn't hot, but I held my peace, not knowing what she meant by grace.

Nancy grabbed my hand in her cold, sweaty one. Kenny clutched my fingers. John cleared his throat and spoke for the first time.

“Be present at our table, Lord. Be here and everywhere adored. Thy creatures bless and grant that we may feast in paradise with Thee.” John’s voice held the same note that Allegra’s grandmother used when invoking Hel. Mom always called it reverence.

Nancy gave me a squeeze, dropped my hand, and picked up her spoon. “Eat up,” she said.

The soup was thick and stone cold, and tasted funny. I didn’t like it at all and pushed my spoon around, lifting a mouthful to my lips every so often, then sliding it back into the bowl.

“You’re not eating. Wasting food is a sin.” Nancy dug her elbow into my ribs.

The thump left me breathless, but I refused to give in to her. Instead, I changed the conversation. “Which lord do you invoke?”

That was a huge mistake.

“There is only one Lord.” Rushing to correct me, John spit, and bits of beans and broth landed on my face. He had a snaggle tooth that showed every time he opened his mouth. The reason, I guessed, he kept quiet.

“A heathen,” Nancy breathed the word. “Your family ain’t churched?”

John hacked and rasped out, “I am the Lord, your God, who brought you outta the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.”

“You’ve been to Egypt?” They didn’t seem like the kind of people to go traveling, but maybe that explained their poverty.

Raising my gaze, I didn’t miss the look that passed between Nancy and John. No more dumb questions from me.



After helping Nancy clear the table, I invoked the goddess Eris in her guise as trickster. With the goddess's help and a bit of luck, Nancy might think my bowl was empty. Turned toward the sink, she concentrated on scrubbing dishes in a pan of greasy water while I surreptitiously scraped my bowl into the brown bag of scraps.

An hour later, John grunted and went outside into the freezing cold.

"My stomach ain't good neither, Ma." Kenny looked pale and sweaty. "I need the bucket."

"Hey," I said to distract him. "Wanna see a magic trick?" Humans thought all magic was sleight of hand, or at least that's what Mom taught. With a puff of air on my palm, I manifested the pale pink flames of trick fire. Kenny came closer.

"Touch it," I said. "Don't be afraid."

He reached out with a tentative finger. "Wow. It doesn't burn."

Nancy came and looked and scowled. "Those who practice magic will darken their souls and gain Satan's hell."

Kenny's chin trembled. "It's just a trick, Ma. Like she said. Pretty." But he left his finger in the flame too long and yanked his hand away. "Ouch." He looked up at me. "It sorta burns."

"After a while," I fisted my hand to extinguish the fire. Nancy's attitude startled me. She wasn't a male but exactly the type of person Mom warned against. The ones who accused women of witchcraft. The haters and fanatics.

“Don’t do that again.” Nancy kept the warning mild, and I recognized the same tone Mom might use. Nancy must believe she owned the truth.

The notion gave me new perspective. Witches were convinced they’re in the right. Witch-hunters must feel the same way.

The thought urged me to leave. I pressed my hands to my empty stomach and worked out the time it would take to walk from here to home. At night. Four hours or five, and wouldn’t I lose my way before I found the rest stop? The temperature was dropping, and a cold wind whooshed through the open door every time John or Kenny made an outhouse run. Even my best spells wouldn’t keep me warm enough.

Until sunrise, I was stuck with these people, and even if I left before they woke, I needed a way to keep them from following.

“Come along.” Nancy led me to the back bedroom that I guessed she usually shared with John.

“No need to disturb you,” I said, using my best Holiday manners. “If you have a spare blanket, I can curl up on the floor.” I pointed through the door to where the measly fire still gave off heat. The bedroom was colder than the proverbial witch-hunter’s heart.

Nancy shook her head while taking off her sweater and blouse. Underneath, she wore what looked like my great-grandmother Phoebe’s shift. Sleeveless with a bit of lace, it covered her collarbone, and I’d bet anything reached below her knees.

The bed emanated an odor a bit like great grandma. My earliest memory, aged three, was great-grandma burning and the sweetish fragrance of her roasting body mixed with the overpowering scent of roses. Nancy had that same off-putting perfume.

“What on earth are you thinking?” Nancy shrugged into a nightgown. The hem fell to the floor, and she reached under it to remove her pants. Next, she sat on the edge of the bed to take off her boots. “Come and climb into bed. It’s too cold to sleep on the floor.”

When I lifted the hem of my tunic, she said, “No, don’t undress. We’ll worry on your wrinkled clothes tomorrow.”

Gingerly, I crept in beside her and pulled the icy covers to my chin. Still sitting, Nancy glared at me. Her hands pressed together, she said, “Time to pray,” and waited until I scrambled up to sit beside her.

I mustered an enthusiastic expression. This family invoked the divine a lot, and all I could figure was they hoped for enough magic to make their lives easier.

“Dear Lord,” Nancy began in a voice filled with reverence. “Until you return with clouds descending, we will tarry in your grace and blessing. For John and I, and of course Kenny. And today, Lord, for Piper who abides with us for—” She hesitated and looked at me.

“Today.” Not wanting to tell her I was leaving tomorrow, I didn’t promise anything more.

“Amen.” Nancy lay down, her head on the pillow and the covers pulled over her nose. In no time at all, she was snoring away, loud as a pig’s snort. I turned away to avoid her stinky breath. From up in the loft came a thump, followed by the sounds of retching.

Nancy turned on her stomach and pushed her way to the middle of the bed. I scooted to the edge so as not to touch her and heaved a sigh. It was going to be a long, loud night.



Sure enough, I gave up trying to sleep around midnight. I didn’t bother with my boots but crept across the floor in woolen stockings. Cold radiated from the ground below. These humans weren’t smart enough to build a sub-floor. The Hibbins family had been

crafting joists and sub-floors forever, or at least since 1799 when Holiday was first settled. Here, I might as well have walked on permafrost.

The fire hadn't been properly banked, so that was the first thing I put my hand to. I did it without casting a spell, keeping in mind Mom's stricture to use magic sparingly.

I grabbed my cloak where it hung on a peg and opened the door. A gust of wind swirled, letting in dead leaves and an icy mist, reminding me to step into my boots.

After pulling my cloak tight around me, I slipped outside. A first quarter moon reflected light on fast-moving clouds. The air glistened, whitish, and the trees loomed sinister, ever-present watchers. A high-pitched yip-yip sounded in the distance. Coyotes, for sure, coming this way.

Getting my bearings, I trod to where a coop stood some distance behind the outhouse. Frenzied hens pecked at the broken fencing. Rat eyes gleamed in the nearby bushes while a buck chewed on a dead chick that the rats had dragged off. The yard was an upheaval of clucking and yipping and a single hooting owl that swooped down to sit on the roof of the hen house.

If ever I needed magic, it was now. The predator owl and coyotes came closer and menaced. Instead, I yowled like Allegra's cat in heat.

The bandit owl flew off, and the coyotes ran the other way, howling to the wind.

The rat paused his meal and bruxed his teeth at me, unafraid.

"Happy to see you too, but I have things to do," I said in a whisper. The last thing I wanted was to wake Nancy.

The frantic hens calmed when I invoked Hestia, goddess of hearth. They filed into the coop, clucking while settling in. Magic brought better results than invocations, but prayers might be enough in the outside world.

“Thank you for at least a half dozen eggs.” Again calling on Hestia while hoping she’d use her divine influence with the hens.

That completed, I turned to the buck, now surrounded by several squeaking does. “Where’s the root cellar?” I asked.

Rats aren’t dependable. They took me on quite a stomp through the night before leading me to the cellar door covered in the detritus of dead leaves and dirt and old rags. I managed to clear it off enough to grasp the rusty handle. Inside, it was pitch black. The buck scrambled down the stone steps first, his eyes glowing like a tiny flashlight.

Certain no one was around to see me, I manifested light using trick fire and found most of the usable produce stacked near the entrance. Potatoes. Onions. Garlic. All still fresh enough. The sharpness of mold tempted me farther into the room containing bags of mildewed beans and flour. My guardian buck hissed, and I squinted but couldn’t see what had upset him. I backed out fast.

If my prayers worked and the hens cooperated by laying eggs, we’d have omelets for breakfast. My mouth watered and my belly grumbled just thinking about a salty, eggy, oniony, *hot* breakfast.

But it wouldn’t be for me. I’d take off long before breakfast was served.

After wiping my feet on brown clumps of grass, I took my boots off and, on tiptoes, sneaked inside. Nancy was up and dressed and waiting for me. She frowned when I pulled the potatoes and onions out of my tunic pockets.

“Where’d those come from?”

She must not have been fully awake. “Your root cellar.”

“Who gave you permission?”

Early on, I learned to never answer rhetorical questions. Instead, I put the vegetables on the kitchen table and grabbed the water bucket. Now was my chance to leave. “In a while, you will want to check the hens,” I said. “They may have eggs.”

Slow-witted, she stared at me open-mouthed, making me want to slap her jaw shut.

Nancy’s eyes turned sly. “Those hens ain’t laid for half a year. More.”

An argument with her would only work against me. “I prayed.” I lowered my head with what I hoped looked like John’s reverence.

No fool she. Taking the bucket, she shoved me. I fisted my hands to keep from shoving back. “You go check the hen house,” she said. “Then fetch water. I’m going after wood and don’t forget. I’ll be checking.”

Keeping an eye out for her, I collected seven eggs. Nancy filled her puny basket with two sticks of firewood and a bit of kindling. No wonder their food was cold.

“You’ll need more than that,” I said.

Nancy sniffed. “Rude girl. Less than a cord we have. It has to last the winter.”

She was right. No wood, no coal, no electricity. These people were in a world of hurt, and it made me sad. With magic, I might be able to give Nancy and John enough heat to last through March. Mom’s warnings rang in my head.

Nancy dumped the wood at the back door. “Gonna get some butter.” She shivered, her lips blue. “Set the eggs down and start the stove.”

It struck me then why Nancy wanted me here. If Mom was right about men, I’d bet anything John and Kenny made her do all the housework and cooking. She wanted a slave, not a daughter. They’d torment me until I obeyed.

The sun peeked over the horizon. A north wind blew up and more snow fell. A rooster crowed in the distance. I had to get away.



Lighting the stove was impossible. I slammed the back door behind me and went to the wood pile, scrabbling through it for more kindling. My rats stuck their heads out and chittered.

Nancy gave a mighty screech and came running, swinging a hatchet. Had she tried to kill a hen? I hissed at the rats, and they scampered deep into the wood pile, safe despite Nancy hacking at it. The wood fell and rolled into the yard.

She turned on me and swung the hatchet in a wild circle. “Now you’ve done it.”

Like the rats, I skipped backwards to safety. “The stove’s gonna be fine,” I said.

Allegra understood all five fires—electrical, eldritch, effervescent, eternal, and trick. Her mother had sworn her to secrecy, but Allegra whispered all her secrets to me. I waved and crossed my fingers in a certain way, gratified to hear the kitchen stove give a whoosh.

“I started the stove,” I said again, keeping a close eye on Nancy until she dropped the hatchet. “Kenny can pile this up again. Come on and we’ll make breakfast.”

I used eldritch fire of purple flames and nothing like the normal, combustible fire. I needed a way to explain the difference.

Nancy preceded me up the back steps. She grabbed a piece of kindling from me, ready to throw it in the stove. “We used to have plenty wood before the government took away the subsidies. Now even the local bank won’t lend the money to take us through winter.” She went silent, her eyes wide, gaping at the stove. The lit burner glowed a merry lavender. Nancy backed away. “Ain’t never seen fire like that before.”

I stretched, popping my neck. “It’s an oxygen fire.”

“A what?”

“Oxygen fire. You know. It gets fuel from oxygen.” Ignoring her disbelieving look, I went on. “Like air feeds fire, so you’re never supposed to open a door or window when you see flames?”

Nancy nodded. “Yeah?” She had priorities. Breakfast was more important than how I’d made fire out of nothing. “Peel them onions,” she said. “And the potatoes.”

She observed as I did the prep and grated the butter.

“You chop fast,” she said.

“My mom’s a great cook.” I didn’t add how much magic Mom used. Eldritch fire cooks faster than wood, and no, oxygen is not the source of fuel.

Nancy pushed me out of the way. The continuous pokes and prods were getting on my nerves, but I held my peace.

“Watch me now,” she said, although she only cracked the eggs into a bowl and whipped them. The potatoes and onions browned while I inched to the front door.

Just then, John and Kenny came in from outside, carrying the wind and cold with them. They smelled fresh, all reek of tummy upset gone.

“Saw a rat under the porch,” Kenny said.

Nancy nodded to John. “Lookee that fire.”

While John goggled at the stove, Nancy poured the eggs into the pan. Even Kenny turned away, his attention on the sizzling scrambled eggs. Now was my chance to escape out the front door. I was hungry, but freedom meant more to me than starvation.

And then John put his finger alongside his nose, like he was about to say something important. I stopped in my tracks. “Witches bring rats,” he said.

The blood drained from my head. Helping them had been a huge mistake, and with it came the cost of using magic.

The tang of burning onions filled the tiny cabin. I dared a teensy step toward the door.

Nancy wheeled in my direction. “Witch. Exodus Twenty-two. Any woman using unnatural powers or secret arts is to be put to death.”

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” intoned John, and Nancy added, “Purple fire had to be unnatural.”

Every defensive charm Mom had ever taught me ran through my mind. I could be invisible. I could remove their memory of me. I could paralyze them long enough to get away.

Except here was something I never realized before. Under stress, my magic didn’t work.

“I’m not a witch.” It took effort to make that lie sound like truth. “I used oxygen to make the fire burn hotter, is all. Nothing unusual about that.”

“The fire,” said Nancy.

“Wood and oxygen. You use it every day.” I felt faint but not so lightheaded that I couldn’t figure out how to save myself.

But Nancy realized I’d manifested something different. Eldritch flames didn’t resemble combustible fire in the slightest.

Nancy drew herself up to her full height and came toward me. I scooted back while tapping on my thigh for safeguards.

“John,” she said, her voice somber. “You must sacrifice your chair.”

Without saying a word, Kenny carried his father's chair outside and placed it in the yard.

Nancy turned to John. "This is the Lord's work. We must sacrifice the winter wood. Never fear. He will provide." She threw her head back and recited, "Psalms Four. Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord." Tenderly, she reached out and touched John's cheek. "Take the witch outside," she whispered.

My magic didn't work. I murmured an invisibility spell, but was still visible. I chanted for immobility, but they still moved.

John marched me through the door, minus my wool cloak that Mom had woven and was my favorite. I was bootless, and my socks didn't keep out the cold.

I dropped into a crouch, forcing John to lose his grip, but it did no good. One of my braids fell free, and John snatched it as I ran. Blinded by the searing pain and caught up short, I didn't have the energy to fight. John shoved me into the chair while Kenny piled wood around me.

It took Nancy no time at all to tie my ankles and hands, my arms behind the tall chair back and the rope around my middle. John brought out a can of gasoline from behind the woodpile.

She'd tied me tight. Icy wind cut me to the bone. A few snowflakes drifted onto my shoulders, but not enough wet to extinguish a gasoline fire fell from the sky.

I tried again to make them forget me and failed. These humans had their own brand of magic, a Lord they trusted unfailingly.

Nancy went back into the house and reemerged with an open book in her hand. "Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them." She raised one hand above her head, riffling the book's pages with the other. "A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death."

She leaned toward me, her nose against mine, her breath rotten, and said, “You know what a spiritist is, don’t you? A *witch*. Never suffer a witch to live.”

Around the corner of the outhouse three tiny faces appeared. Then three more. The rat buck and his harem came to see what was happening. If only they could save me since I couldn’t save myself. Witch-hunter prayers must hinder my magic. The fault was mine. I’d ignored every caution ever given.

I had one last hope and asked the rats. Could their sharp teeth bite through hemp rope?

Nancy poured gasoline on the wood, splashing me plenty. The cold wet made me shiver. The stink burned my nose, a foreshadowing of the fire to come.

I beleaguered the rats with questions, asking for help, figuring out what they could do. My lips moved without sound and, before the flames circled me, the buck ran to gnaw the rope around my feet.

“Look,” said Kenny, pointing. “The rat’s biting her.”

“Unclean, unclean,” was the best Nancy could do.

The buck squealed, and the females came running as the fire combusted and inched closer. For a second, warmth enveloped me and then came the burn. The rats could never free me before I went up in smoke. I dug deep, remembering what Allegra had taught me about exchanging one form of fire to another. If only it would work...

Flames caught the buck’s tail. He rolled. The hem of my tunic smoldered. If the wind would shift, I’d have time enough. Mom had told me once that our generation had special powers with air because our father was an Air Elemental. Closing my eyes, I willed the wind to blow from east to southwest. Amazingly, this time, the magic worked.

The buck jumped to my lap and chewed at the rope around my middle. The fire reached my leg, and oh, how it hurt. I shouted Allegra’s charm, “Trick, trick, change it

quick,” and the flames mutated from yellow to pink. It hurt just as much. Hunching my shoulders, I pulled free of the chair.

Behind me, yellow and orange flames enveloped the buck, his screech an agonizing sound of sacrifice.

I could do nothing to help him except not lose my chance at freedom. I ran, and the humans behind me must’ve thought I was a goner, wrapped in the flames of trick fire. It smarted but caused no lasting damage.

With three female rats riding my shoulders, I ran down the dirt trail that led away from Nancy’s cabin, then west along the shoulder of I-80, ignoring the honking horns and catcalls. The trick fire long gone out, I froze in my shredded tunic and socks. My feet bled. It took forever to reach the rest stop, my hands still tied behind my back, breathless, my legs aching.

Mom waited at the tree line, and I fell into her arms, sobbing.



“Your birthday’s tonight,” Mom said after she’d attended to my burns and bloody feet. “Tonight’s the winter solstice and the Sweet Sixteen ritual.”

“I know.” Guarded, I waited for her to take this privilege from me.

Mom frowned. “Humans stopped burning witches when they stopped believing in magic. Dread the day a chance encounter with one of us rekindles their ancient beliefs. Men will once again tie witches to stakes.”

Winter sunlight streamed through the kitchen window as Mom put a plate of lamb stew, steaming hot and savory, in front of me.

I looked up at her. “They tried to burn me.”

“Tonight’s ceremony helps safeguard our wards. Making your vows to Holiday is part of what keeps the outside out.” Mom’s sharp gaze speared me, searching for my reaction. “You remember what to say?”

“You won’t make me wait another year?” I asked. My worst fear. I wanted to swear with my friends. I wanted to leave Holiday and never return. Those two wishes warred inside me.

“Tell me what you’ll promise,” said Mom.

I gave a nod and intoned, “I undertake this oath of my own free will and for my good and the good of all Holiday. Here I am and here I stay, free to honor the thirteen full moons and nine sacred days. Free of men until my time to procreate. Free to raise a daughter in witchery, to be the inheritor of the Parker power. Safe from those who would destroy witches.”

“Yes, yes. Good girl.” Mom waved and said no more.

“You won’t keep me from the ritual?” I had to ask a second time.

“Whether you promise is up to you,” said Mom. “Only you know what is in your heart.”

Ambivalence battled inside me but with that, I had to be content.



The hour arrived, the bonfire burned, the vows taken. I lied when I promised.

Rat eyes gleamed from the darkness, waiting for the feast's crumbs. Three new females had joined Holiday's mischief, the harem accepting them for their courage and bravery in helping me escape.

I talked to my rats after everybody left, and explained my dilemma. They chewed the festival's remains and the year's darkest day closed in the dawn of brighter days to come.

END