

The Turning of the Year

It was deep in the night when Aggie shook Rose's shoulder, rousing her from bed. Rose awoke with a bit of a start, then blinked sleepily.

"Aggie?" She wrinkled up her nose in confusion. "What 'tis?"

"Get you up," Aggie whispered, so as not to wake Adria in her cot nearby. "Softly. Come with me."

"Where?" Rose asked.

"Just come. There is something you must see."

"Mm-mm," Rose refused, shaking her head. "Not on All Hallow's Eve. That 'tis what you always told me, is it not? I am staying right here." She punctuated her decision by flopping back onto her pillow and crossing her arms. "For all I know, you are a wayward spirit dressing up in an Aggie suit to trick me."

Aggie rolled her eyes. "Rose," she groaned, and took Rose's stubborn hand in her own. Rose squinted at it, her Keeper senses reaching out with tiny tendrils into Aggie's palm. There they found little flashes of light, smiles, spectacles, and the smells of smoke and clean straw. It was the real Aggie, all right. Rose looked curiously into her face.

"Come along," Aggie urged quietly.

"But...you always said I must never go out this night. Everyone says so."

"Aye, for that it was never your place before, you silly nit," Aggie said. "'Tis a night for mages. But you are a Keeper now. Thoren and Gaia say 'tis time you saw the truth of this night." Aggie squeezed Rose's hand and pulled her from bed gently. "No worries," she smiled. "All shall be well. Just keep hold of your tongue and your head."

Aggie lead Rose to the front of the Order of the Sun's shop, closing the door silently behind them both. From beneath the little window nook, she drew a golden colored candle that Rose hadn't seen before. Standing on tip-toe, Aggie lit it from a sun-shaped lantern swaying from the eaves in the chilly breeze.

"When did we get that lantern?" Rose asked.

"I just put it out tonight," Aggie said, "but we have always had it." Something in the way she said "always" seemed very ancient to Rose; certainly older than Aggie and maybe even older than the Order of the Sun itself. Aggie blew the lantern out with a little puff and suddenly the street seemed much darker than Rose would have expected without that one little light. But the candle flickered fiercely in the autumn wind, holding back the darkness and never going out.

"Come along," Aggie whispered, and nodded up the hill towards the glen. Rose's shoulders hunched up both nervously and excitedly, and she stuck close to her band sister as they walked slowly and cautiously past the Dirty Duck Inn and beyond into deeper darkness. All around them, little wisps of pale light and mist flitted through the trees and around the corners of shops, whispering once and then vanishing. "Do not follow them," Aggie warned. She cupped one hand around the flame of the golden candle. "Follow only this light here, and that one there." She nodded towards the glen again, and now Rose could see a small bonfire burning in the camp of the Lunar Tribe.

But everyone there is supposed to be asleep, she thought. Then again...so am I.

The Lunar Tribe camp had never seemed quite so far away before, but Rose and Aggie made their way through the groaning trees one step at a time. As they drew nearer, Rose could

see four figures standing around the fire. They all seemed to be watching and waiting. One by one, they became clearer: first Thoren's towering protective presence, then Gaia's powerfully maternal stance, then Talia's ferocity and wisdom, then Sydney's steady, daring gaze. Seeing how they stood there, Rose couldn't help thinking of that day nearly two years ago when she was brought on trial before the camp. Thoren's brow bunched up as he looked at her.

"She looks like a terrified turtle," he remarked. "What did you tell her, Aggie?"

"Nothing!" Aggie scoffed defensively.

Thoren rolled his eye. "Aye, and that would be wherefore she is terrified," he said.

"Worry not, Rose," Gaia reassured her. "'Tis a simple task to be done here, and you need only witness." She opened her palms to the gathered group, and Rose vaguely noticed that she was wearing gloves. "'Tis a night for mages."

"So Aggie said," Rose noted. She looked around at the four of them, standing on the other side of the fire from she and Aggie. "Where is Vashta?" she asked.

"Asleep, like her herbs," Sydney yawned. "Her strength comes from the Earth, and the Earth slumbers."

"Well let us be on with it," Thoren said in his deep, rumbling voice. He nodded to the Order of the Sun side of the fire, and then to the Lunar Tribe side. "I, Thoren Grymm, note the presence of the mages of both factions. Talia, write that down."

"I already have, big brother," Talia quipped, scribbling in a blue book that Rose didn't recognize. "I know my part."

"Oh, and the Keepers," Thoren added hurriedly. "I also note the presence of the Keepers. That be new this year."

"I have it, big brother. I have it," Talia insisted, pointing to her sleek lettering.

As they bickered lightly, Aggie leaned over to Rose. "'Tis Sydney's first year witnessing too," she whispered. "The last couple years, 't'was only Gaia and I, since the sides must be balanced and the Order has had only one mage 'til now. But now that you are a Keeper and must witness as well, 'tis time for another Lunar Tribe mage to join us, to keep the sides even."

"But Gaia is a Keeper too," Rose reminded. "Shouldn't she witness and Sydney...do the task, whatever the task is?"

"Gaia is the older of the two," Aggie explained. "And while Vashta draws strength from the Earth, Sydney draws hers from Quintessence. The Equinoxes are her time, not this night."

"Wherefore?" Rose asked. "What happens this night?"

Aggie shushed her quickly as Thoren resumed speaking.

"Right then," he said. "All is recorded. Talia, lend us now your invocation."

Talia lifted her book towards the firelight and began to read.

*In aging light, with harvest wine,
the summer's gown doth loose and fall
and pass the might of seasons' time
from hand to hand and hall to hall.*

*O winter, keep the world in dreams
and wisdom, like young babes in bed,
as from beyond the churning streams,*

we gaze upon the sacred dead.

*Now in the darkening, we hear:
“Now is the turning of the year.”*

“That was a good one,” Thoren noted.

“Grammercy,” Talia grinned, tucking the book away.

“I especially liked the drunk naked bit,” he smirked. Talia rolled her eyes and groaned, deciding she’d punch him in the arm later.

Thoren nodded solemnly towards Rose and Sydney. “Our part here is done,” he rumbled. “We leave you now to the rest.” With that, he and Talia departed into the darkness towards their vardos. The remaining four stood silent and still for the better part of three minutes, making sure to give Thoren and Talia time to shut their doors before the rest began.

Gaia lifted her hands slowly. She swung them together with a firm *clap!* Then again, and again, in a slow and steady beat. She did so four times, and then echoing claps began to sound from elsewhere in the dark trees. Rose flinched and look around, but saw nothing. She shuffled a step or two closer to the bonfire as the rhythmic clapping all around grew thicker, speaking of more and more invisible hands joining in. She could see Sydney’s eyes darting about apprehensively as well, though she looked a bit less afraid.

Gaia stopped clapping, but the unseen watchers around them continued without her. Soon, the soothing sound of flutes joined the beat. Aggie and Gaia began to step towards each other in time with it, just to the side of the bonfire. By their pace and stately steps, Rose realized that this was the beginning of a dance. She wondered for a moment if she were expected to join in, but remembered that she’d been told to act as witness only. Somewhere, a low fiddle began to scrape its notes across the flutes’ melody. The eerie notes grew bit by bit into a song, both beautiful and inexplicably chilling.

Beside the fire, Aggie held the golden candle reverently in one hand, stretched to the side towards Gaia as they circled one another shoulder-to-shoulder around the candle in the center. Their outside arms arched gracefully over their heads towards each other, their fingertips barely touching high over the candle’s flame. The song came to a sweeping crescendo as they completed one half circle, and then the two women stopped and pivoted to face one another directly, sinking back into their heels. Aggie cupped both hands around the base of the candle and held it out to Gaia. Gaia took it delicately in both hands as Aggie drew hers away. The flame surged to a small blaze for a few seconds, and in the dancing flicker of the shadows around the wick, Rose could see the color of the candle shift from brilliant gold to soft shimmering silver. The flame faded back to its gentler glow and the song resounding from the trees began to drift away, as if the musicians were drawing back into the darkness.

Gaia turned and nodded to Sydney, who snapped out of her momentary trance and hurriedly picked up a silver lantern at her feet. It was formed in the shape of the triple moon. She brought it forward and held it high for Gaia to light it, then closed the little doors around it protectively. Gaia blew the silver candle out and took the lantern carefully from Sydney’s fingers.

“Keep it well,” Aggie said. The words sounded old and practiced.

“I always do,” Gaia replied with an equally old and practiced tone. Both women smiled

softly. "Until Beltane, when I return it to you."

Aggie nodded once and stepped away. She laid her hand gently on Rose's arm as she went, signaling that it was time to go. Rose shook the bewildered daze from her head and followed, glancing back over her shoulder at the little flicker of light in the moon-shaped lantern.

"That was it?" she whispered as they returned to the Order of the Sun camp. Aggie nodded. Rose paused and then asked, "What was it?"

"The turning of the year," Aggie replied. "Now begins the dark half, when the power of the Lunar Tribe is strongest. When the light half begins again in the spring, Gaia returns the flame to us."

"How long has this been going on?" Rose asked.

Aggie drew a thoughtful breath and began to answer, but stopped. Instead, she reached up to the eaves of the Order of the Sun camp and pulled down the sun-shaped lantern. "Here," she said, and held it out to Rose to touch. Rose hesitated for a moment, then uncurled her pink fingers and rested them delicately on the side of the lantern.

It felt like falling backwards. It was old...impossibly old. She could see Aggie's part in it like a faint scuff on the surface: only going back a couple of years, when the two of them had first joined Thoren's band. But before that, there were countless names and faces and voices, all overlapping one another and echoing backwards through the ages. Like a round singing the passage of the years, or a prayer wheel that never stopped turning. It didn't turn the seasons themselves, but was part of their turning all the same. One after another after another, receiving the power of Light every spring and returning it in the autumn when the divine Dark took hold. Always giving, always receiving. Even when the wars between the Order of the Sun and the Lunar Tribe threatened to tear the Twisted Claw apart, there was always this holding them together. As Rose went further and further backwards, she began to see that she'd been right earlier: this was, indeed, older than the Order. Older than the Army of Light. Older than many things she'd never imagined and didn't quite understand. What's more, she could see that the lantern itself was not a lantern at all, but something else that she couldn't identify...and knew with absolute certainty that she never would. But she knew with the same certainty that whatever it was, it was alive.

Aggie pulled the lantern away. The broken connection hit like a sudden rush of cold air. Rose swayed breathlessly for a moment. Aggie watched her face to be sure she was all right, but didn't speak. Without a word, she went to the little window nook and packed the lantern away, wrapping it carefully in cloths and threadbare cushions. When she'd finished, she returned to Rose's side.

"You probably know more of it than I do now," she said a little sadly, though Rose wasn't sure whom the sadness was for.

Rose rested a comforting hand on Aggie's shoulder. "I know you have done well by it," she said. *And it likes you*, but she didn't say that part, knowing it might frighten Aggie to know too much about the lantern.

Aggie's cheeks flushed happily. "Aye?" she asked. Rose nodded.

From within, Adria let out a long snore. Rose smirked at it. "Let us get some sleep," she said. "If we can."

"I reserve the honor of whacking her with a pillow," Aggie said, and went inside.

As Rose followed Aggie past the window nook, she paused. She looked down towards

the box where the lantern lay sleeping. She held still for a moment and imagined a warm heartbeat, soft and low, though there was nothing to be heard but silence. *It ought to have a name*, she thought. *Even if it isn't its true name, it ought to be called something.*

"You coming, Rose?" Aggie called.

"Aye, coming," Rose answered. She glanced back down at the box.

See you in the spring, Jack, she thought to it, and smiled.