

I hummed the last few notes of a folk song and frowned as the music faded off into the air. The forest had remained silent throughout every verse.

“Stay quiet then.” I leaned forward and yanked up another handful of sanicle, roots and all. The forest’s choir of voices didn’t pitch in every day, but Father had been gone so long that today I could have used the company. Back in the village, I’d be working in the apothecary all day without much chance to venture out onto the street and chat with others.

As early morning light poked through the pines, I tried one last time to coax the voices into joining me. But even the bawdy drinking song I’d overheard spilling out from the tavern last night wasn’t enough to convince them to break their vow of silence. I chuckled to myself as I finished filling my woven basket with plants.

Years ago, I’d feared the voices right down to the marrow of my bones. I couldn’t sleep without them echoing from the forest and giving me nightmares. But now here I was trying to force them to speak to me. I had my mother to thank for the change. She spent hours when I was young telling me stories of the forest and all that lived here. And she would always tell me, *Isolde, we are witches, half-wild ourselves*, and assure me that of all the places in the world, the forest was where we most belonged. Here, among the traces of savage magic and other wild things. Only things to respect, my mother would reassure me, though. Not things to fear.

After she’d disappeared out here among the pines, I’d viewed the forest with both respect and fear. But still, I kept coming back.

With one last glance at the trees behind me, I tightened my grip on my basket and started back toward Talstadt. As I passed the familiar blackberry bramble, I swept aside a leafed branch to see how the buds were faring. Blackberry season was the year’s best time and though it was only April, I was already anticipating their sweet taste come summer.

I yelped as I withdrew my hand from the bramble. Damn thorns. Only a prick but it was enough to make me bleed. I inspected my thumb before wiping the blood away. The sight of blood had never bothered me anyway. As a healer, I often dealt with other’s blood. But as a witch, I dealt with my own.

Commented [CS1]: Cool concept

Commented [CS2]: I had to read this a few times to figure out what was bothering me about it, here’s the ridiculously nit-picky thing I decided:

I’m not sure if she means 1) that this is her state of being since her father left—working at the apothecary and feeling lonely, 2) that she was supposed to be in the village working and had come here to talk to the forest instead, or 3) that she has to go back to the village to work after this and is sad not to have company now because there won’t be any when she goes back.

Commented [CS3]: Oh...have they sung for her before? If there’s a vow of silence then is she surprised they sing for her? Do they sing for anyone else?

Commented [CS4]: So...there’s NOT a vow of silence?

Commented [CS5]: nice

Commented [CS6]: love the idea, I feel like the execution is a little clunky though?

Commented [CS7]: Why...wouldn’t she come back? “I’d viewed the forest with both respect and fear” seems very measured and complacent. Is she sad about her mother disappearing? Was it planned? Did the forest TAKE her? I’m not getting a read on the emotions attached to her mother’s disappearance and how that either augments or is in contrast to how she views the forest.

Commented [CS8]: Interesting world building

My mother's stories had often involved the past witches of our family and the way they had used their blood to access their differing but equally powerful abilities. Some days it was comforting to know that, while I might be the only witch of our line still alive, I was not truly alone in my magic.

I left the forest and its solace behind as I reached the edge of Talstadt. The sun had fully cleared the horizon, but it was early enough that half the village was still asleep and many of the half-timbered buildings were quiet. I hurried along Talstadt's lone dirt road until I reached my apothecary. Since I was running it alone for now, ingredient gathering had been delegated to the early morning when the apothecary wasn't yet open.

My nose wrinkled and I stopped a few paces from my front door. At least, no one usually expected it to be open at this time. But a man stood directly in front of the building with his arms crossed and impatience twisting his face.

I brushed back a few of the brown curls that had fallen into my eyes and put on the smile I always saved for customers. Pleasant, encouraging, but empty.

Commented [CS9]: nice

"Hello." I waved to the man with my free hand before unlocking the door. He nodded in greeting as I gestured him inside.

The man's tall frame took up a large part of the doorframe as he stepped through it. I hurried past him to the worn, wooden front counter. After setting aside my basket and tying on an apron, I turned to face the man. He peered around the apothecary's front room as he took in the shelves of ready-made draughts. His gaze lingered on the drying plants that hung from the rafters above, filling the place with the sweet scent of herbs.

It wasn't often that a stranger crossed through Talstadt. The village I'd grown up in was isolated in the Alps and small enough that it wasn't worth the visit for many. Though my mother's healing magic had made the apothecary famous for its cures, it tended to be only the truly desperate who came in search of it. And once my mother and her reputation had disappeared, there had been less and less of those. Now, the ones who kept us in business were the locals.

As the man stepped closer, I got a better look at him. He must be one of the truly desperate then because he certainly didn't fit in here. With a fine cloak and tailored clothes, he was richer than most living nearby. Possibly even one of the nobility. I forced more civility into my smile and tried to forget my annoyance at his being here so ridiculously early. If he had that kind of money to spend, then it would be worth my time to convince him to spend it here.

The man couldn't have been much older than my seventeen years and he lacked the weighed-down look others his age in Talstadt carried. He had thick, shadow-black hair and his copper complexion was punctuated with a frown. The man rested his hands on the other side of the counter from where I stood and I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. Clean nails, no callouses, and smooth with not a scar in sight. I almost couldn't help it; my lack of respect for those with a too-easy life.

The man cleared his throat and my eyes flicked up to meet his gaze.

"This is Otto's apothecary, correct?" He said and I crossed my arms. Technically, my mother had left the apothecary to me. "I'd like to speak to him please."

"My father isn't here. He's—"

The man tapped a foot and glanced back at the door over his shoulder. "This is important. When will he be back?"

The smile I'd been so intent on curating disappeared. I hadn't liked the well-dressed, entitled look of him before and now that he'd spoken, I liked him even less.

"Not for two weeks," I said.

The man's mouth tightened. "Otto leaves his own apothecary unattended for that long? I was told this place had a better reputation than that."

I tapped my fingers against the counter. Insulting my apothecary was as good as insulting me. Every part of me wanted to drive the man out the door and bolt it behind him. But I needed his money, so I held my tongue.

Commented [CS10]: couldn't help what?
She couldn't help her lack of respect?
This seems like an incomplete thought.

Commented [CS11]: So she left. She didn't die or disappear, she got her affairs in order first.

“My father’s travels bring back ingredients you won’t find anywhere else in this kingdom. They’re part of the reason this apothecary is known throughout Bavaria and can offer such rare remedies and effective draughts.”

At my words, the man’s gaze swept over the drying plants again. He even dared to reach out and stroke one. “And what’s the rest of the reason behind this apothecary’s success?”

I jutted my chin out. “Me.”

The hanging plants overhead lost his attention as it returned to me. From his arched eyebrow, it might have been preferable for the plants to remain at the center of his gaze. But then, I’d never been afraid of grouchy customers before.

“You seem young,” he said. “Are you even of marrying age?”

“I’ve spent seventeen years helping to run this apothecary. And my father claims my draughts are far better than his, though none can rival my mother’s.” I bit my tongue before I could add **that I wasn’t young, just short.**

The man leaned in. “Truly? Then where is she?”

A question I’d been attempting to answer for years myself. “She’s been missing for five years. Do let me know if you see her.”

He slammed his hand down on the counter and I jumped at the noise. “Do you know how long I had to ride to reach this town?” He gestured out the open window to the dirt street beyond. “If it can even be called that. Finding this place was not easy for me. So please, I’d appreciate some help.”

I narrowed my eyes. We didn’t need his business that badly.

“It was lovely meeting you.” I pointed to the door. “Now get out of my apothecary.”

The man stared at me. When he made no effort to move toward the door, I picked my apron up **and tied it on again.** I had no more time to waste on someone like that. I was getting back to work, whether he stayed standing in the apothecary’s front room or not.

I turned away from the counter and strode back through the door separating the two first floor rooms. The sound of it slamming shut behind me was especially satisfying. I pulled my

Commented [CS12]: I like this line

Commented [CS13]: Wow abrupt change with no hints!!
Is she surprised?

Commented [CS14]: She tied it on when she came in, didn’t she?

mortar and pestle down from an upper shelf and began making the draught needed for the blacksmith's cough.

After tossing some different leaves into the mortar, I began grinding it all down. Unfortunately, rather than the apothecary filling with silence, the door behind me opened and heavy footsteps sounded as someone walked through it.

I tightened my grip on the pestle. "I thought I told you to leave."

"I need your help. Please," the man said. "I'm sorry if I offended you."

I focused on grinding the leaves so I would have something to look at rather than him. Damn all the years my mother had spent teaching me never to refuse to give help to another. As irritating as that man was, I couldn't bring myself to chase him away a second time.

At last I set the pestle down and turned to face the man. His eyes had lost all steel and his face had softened. It wasn't until he slightly bent his head that I spoke.

"Fine," I said, accepting his silent concession. "I'll help you as best I can. Now, are you going to tell me your problem?"

The man gestured to the wooden set of table and chairs in one corner of the room. "Shall we sit? It's going to take some explaining."

I crossed the room and took the closest chair. The man sat across from me in the other but didn't lean back like I had. Instead, he sat perched on the edge of his chair like a bird ready to take flight at the first sign of trouble. What sort of trouble he was waiting for, though, I wasn't sure.

"Thank you for your help. By the way, I'm Johan." He offered me his hand and made sure to add, "Of Maurstatten," The polite introduction was a little late given everything that had already happened between us, but I shook his hand anyway. I at least appreciated his attempt at starting over. And I'd heard of Maurstatten, which made him seem like slightly less of a stranger. It was a town somewhat close by, just one that I'd never had a reason to visit.

Commented [CS15]: He's totally invading her space here (I think? Or is this more public space). Does it bother her?

“I’m Isolde.” My mouth quirked. “Of Talstadt.” If Johan was so insistent upon me knowing his **title**, why couldn’t I give myself one? I certainly hadn’t been expecting to be entertained this much today.

Commented [CS16]: Is being from a town a title?

“Right. Listen, I’m here on behalf of an important man. So privacy is imperative, of course. Everyone I spoke to regarding strange illnesses or difficult-to-cure ailments told me to come here.”

I picked at the edge of the table with my fingernail while I thought, right where the wood was chipped and **rough beneath my touch**. Already this was unusual, but Johan had my attention. **I liked a challenge when it came to my work. And a challenge that paid? Even better.** “Who is this man?”

Commented [CS17]: I feel like the internal thought is really heavy throughout this—it seems to be restating the same sorts of things and not following a clear arc of emotion. I’m having a hard time getting a read on this girl.

“I can’t tell you until you agree to my terms.”

“And what are those?” He’d claimed he wanted privacy in this, but I hadn’t expected Johan to keep things private from me as well.

“You keep this a secret. You tell no one, even after he is cured. You come with me, about a day’s ride away, to properly diagnose the illness and to administer the correct draughts. You stay until he is cured. I don’t want to leave with a bottle of something that might work when I could bring you and all your skill with me.”

I let out a surprised laugh. “Come with you? Are you mad?” I glanced over to where the draught I’d been making rested on the counter. **It was a visible reminder of all the responsibilities tying me here.** “I have an apothecary to run. I can’t walk away and leave our lone source of income.”

Commented [CS18]: One that might not need to be explained? Remembering the blacksmith is more emotional than telling us she’s responsibly tied up 😊

“That won’t be a problem,” Johan said. “You’ll be well compensated for your trouble, with a hefty additional payment if you’re successful in curing this man.”

He reached under the table and into his pocket before withdrawing a blue cloth pouch. It clinked as Johan set it between us on the table. I stared at the pouch but kept my hands in my lap. If I took his money, it was like I was agreeing to something fully. But the promise of payment was still tempting. When I didn’t take the pouch right away, Johan shoved it closer toward me.

“Why bother paying me now?” I said. “I haven’t done anything. I haven’t even agreed to anything yet.”

“An advance payment.” Johan’s eyes flicked between the pouch and me. I leaned toward it slightly, a motion he caught.

“Go on,” Johan said. He picked up the pouch and dumped out some of the coins it held.

My chair creaked as I fully leaned forward. That was about enough to convince me.

We’d had fewer and fewer people coming through the apothecary’s front door. But if Johan paid as well as he promised he would, then it’d more than make up for the time I was gone. I looked around the familiar room. I’d been raised right here and if I lost this place, I didn’t just lose my home. I lost my last connection to my mother.

I reached out a hand and scooped up a few of the silver coins. For the apothecary. I tucked the rest of the coins away into a pocket I’d sewn into my skirt. And for me. I couldn’t lie, I was excited for the chance to use my skills to prove myself and to see the world outside Talstadt. This village and the forest surrounding it was a comfortable cage, but it was still a cage and some days when the sky was blue and cloudless, I wanted so badly to fly away that it hurt.

“I’ll do it,” I said. “But you’d better pay enough for it to be worth my time and talents.”

“Of course.” Johan shoved back his chair and stood. “We have wealth to spare.”

Things we like:

- The concept--from what I’ve seen so far--seems intriguing. I always love a healer story!
- Lots of elements to get excited about, the singing forest, her mother who has inexplicably disappeared, the hints of witchy magic. Very cool.
- Some really nice character moments! I love when Johan asks Isolde what the rest of the success of the apothecary is owed to and she says, “Me.” It was a nice moment of confidence. Agreed. I also liked her smile for customers which was pleasant, engaging and empty as well as “I’m not young, just short”
- Some lovely ambience. On the first page, the memory of her mother’s voice: “Isolde, we are witches, half-wild ourselves.” I liked that one too.
- I’m 100% getting Gothic novel vibes, like Isolde is about to go heal Dracula or Frankenstein’s monster or something. I really love that and it makes me want to keep reading! My money’s on a werewolf haha

Commented [CS19]: Okay, maybe this is a better articulation of what I was trying to say earlier about the internal thought: I’m not sure what she wants or what she is worried about in this chapter.

Is it her dad?

Is it that she wants her mother back/needs to find her? That she’s angry her mother left and would never do that to her dad, so she can’t leave?

Is it keeping food on the table/the apothecary afloat? Is it some combination? I feel like we get these little explanations for her behavior as we go rather than knowing up front what it is she’s dwelling on/needing/wanting so that as this scene progresses it either tempts her or complicates things for her without us needing any additional explanation because we already know what’s most important to her. I can see the threads of motivation and stakes here, but they’re not quite clear enough for me to grab hold of them yet?

Commented [CS20]: Why is it a cage? What is keeping her there?

Things that might need a second look:

- My biggest takeaway is to keep your genre/worldbuilding at the forefront of all you do. I saw a note this was historical horror and I don't have any idea of what time period this is meant to be set in. The dialogue--both inner and out-- reads extremely modern, as the MC's animosity toward Johan. If she is meant to be a young peasant girl, running a failing apothecary shop in anytime pre-1960's, there is going to be class deference when an older, male, with apparent means walks in. Keeping things super specific--especially in an opening chapter--will help establish the world and time period so quickly. Without that, it feels like it could be set anywhere/time. Yes, exactly. I definitely didn't think this was taking place in the 1900s/2000s ("nobility" and "apothecary" and a customer refusing to believe a young woman can run the shop and introducing people by townships rather than surnames are pretty clear signifiers that this isn't the present to me), but I agree--if this is historical, it needs to be in a specific historical period, and I just have a nebulous sense of "the past."
- Also want to discuss filler words and stage business. They're both taking me out of the story and I would love to see a better sense of Deep POV. Agreed. The balance of internal narration vs blocking vs dialogue was very heavy in the internal narration direction.
- My biggest problem was that I couldn't get a read on what Isolde wanted or why. Throughout the story there are little threads introduced of what maybe the beginnings of what she could want, but I couldn't figure out how she felt about any of it--none of it seemed dire or even more than mildly troublesome to Isolde: her mother disappearing, that she's a witch, her father isn't home, the apothecary seems to (maybe? It wasn't consistent) be in a spot of financial trouble--by the end of the chapter when our change happens--a boy persuades her to go with him to heal his employer, leaving behind the town she grew up in, the forest she sings with, her father etc., etc., I wasn't sure how I should feel about it. She decides to go because she needs the money, but I don't feel like she's giving anything up to go or taking a risk or fulfilling a goal or moving toward something. It's just something that happens.
- This is a small thing, but when Isolde is first talking with Johan, he says something like "Finding this place was not easy for me. So please, I'd appreciate some help," and Isolde reacts like he's just said the most unreasonable and rude thing she's ever heard. And honestly. . . it's not rude? So I left feeling like Isolde was the one being unreasonable.
- I was a little bit confused about the mother--did she leave of her own volition or not? There are clues that it was planned--she left her daughter the apothecary, and her daughter doesn't seem very cut up about her leaving. Sad, missing her, but not...curious or traumatized, if that makes sense? However, she says "my mother has been missing..." which, to me, says it was a surprise.