

## Chapter 1: Disaster in Plain Sight

As they circled the great pot in the dye shed behind the Potluck Yarn shop, the knitting witches could barely believe what they had just witnessed. Scarcely a week ago, their former teacher and dye mistress Aubergine had finally summoned them back to herself to conjure a simmer. Her call of cold fire crystal bursting over the horizon was the signal they had hoped for these past twenty years. It meant they would gather to use their outlawed magic in an attempt to save their world, now being ravaged by war and greed. Just tonight, for the first time since the Potluck disbanded so long ago, they had stoked the fire under the great pot, seeking a shared vision. But would the simmer reveal a true revelation? That required all twelve witches and they could only come up with eleven, they thought.

Fearing to wait any longer, Aubergine had begun the simmer anyway. First billowing steam clouded above the dye pot, to transport their dear elder Mamie Verde to the Crystal Caves. There she could assume her role as the next Guardian of the First-Folk, whose ancient secrets threatened to destroy them all if they should fall within the Dark Queen's grasp. Then the witches encountered the image of Mamie when young in the heavy hourglass filled with shards of crystal—the hourglass that in some circumstances made time stand still. Finally, red haired Ratta recited a legend none had heard before. It was the Lost Tale, imparted to her through Mind Speak by Mamie, who had been Keeper of the Tales before she slipped into her half-dead state. Now it looked as if the simmer had finally released her to take up her new responsibilities, many years overdue.

For the forbidden crystals to release their magic into the dye pot, a Potluck simmer required a full quorum of witches, known as the Twelve. Nonetheless, this simmer looked like it was working, which puzzled Sierra Blue, who had been the last witch to arrive tonight. Mamie

was safe, the Suri Alpaca they had plunged into the pot was dyeing nicely and as Mamie's successor, she had been named the new Keeper of the Tales. Yet she counted only eleven witches including herself. Her lion eyes scanned the broken circle, trying to determine how it could have become whole.

Their Potluck Queen, Aubergine stood with her back to the broken cupboard, the mantle of her black and violet simmer shawl draped over her aged shoulders, urging them to continue. Next to her, on a stool because she was so short, was Smokey Jo, the gnome who loved to play with fire. Then came Esmeralde and Indigo Rose, skilled with remedies and plants. Mamie's former place in the circle came next, the one she herself had just inherited. Two odd ones filled the next spaces: Ratta, tender caretaker to Mamie who had inadvertently become the keeper of one last tale, and Lavender Mae, driven near-mad by her quest for the amethyst missing from the powerful crystal necklace, stolen all those years ago. Sierra paused to consider her own daughter Skye, in the place formerly held by herself, and Little Teal, whom all knew as Trader, the youngest and most recent addition to the group. A gap stood between the two girls' spaces, made more noticeable now that Trader held the hourglass high for all to see. That gap was where Tasman had stood among them before she destroyed Trader's aunt Teal, who had been one of their own. Tasman betrayed them all and fled south to become the Dark Queen and the cause behind the present war. Finally Sierra's eyes rested on the Highland shepherdess Winter Wheat, the one among them who wandered farthest, and housemother Lilac Lily, who traveled least. Sierra looked around the room carefully. If Teal was really just a ghost and Mamie no longer counted among the Twelve, there were just eleven witches here.

Suddenly the raven-haired servant girl whom Smokey Jo had fetched from the kitchen to help carry a final load of firewood stepped from the shadows where she had been hiding and

fully occupied the open place in the circle beside Skye. As the maid joined the group, the young Mamie still visible in the hourglass turned and stared in her direction. Gazing back at the shadowy figure, the serving girl laughed loudly, a sound out of keeping with her submissive appearance. Mamie's shape began to blur. The hourglass went dark. After waiting a few seconds, Trader set it slowly down on the table.

"Mamie disappeared," Trader raised her eyes toward the girl who stood before her. "Why would she do that?"

"Only with twelve in the circle can the simmer succeed," the kitchen maid said. She eyed Trader intently. "But more than one of us is not who she seems."

"No!" Aubergine's eyes raged violet. In one swift move, she jerked Trader away, to keep her from rejoining the circle. The frightened girl stumbled to her side, knocking the dye table. The hourglass tumbled to the floor and broke into bits, scattering the purple shards. Glaring at the infiltrator, Aubergine shielded Trader with a protective arm.

"What in cracked crystal ...?" Wheat began. The following words died in her throat as the kitchen maid shifted shape before their eyes, maturing from a servant girl into a regal woman. The air around her rippled as she shed her guise like an unwanted costume. She grew taller and more imposing. Her gaze turned from reserved hazel to cold green, while her hair darkened to the intensity of coal.

Smokey Jo plucked at Aubergine's sleeve. "Who is she?"

"You!" Ratta stared in disbelief. In the dark-haired woman's features Ratta recognized the probing eyes of the man at the stagecoach inn, the one who had flipped a piece of Lowland gold to a wandering bard for tales of the Twelve.

The stranger's mouth twisted into a cruel smile. Then Esmeralde, too, saw something familiar. Wasn't this woman's profile stamped on the magic coin she'd found at the Banebridge Trading Post?

"Who?" Smokey pestered again.

Sierra looked at Aubergine. "Hiding in plain sight," was all she said.

Without answering, Aubergine crossed possessive arms around Trader's shoulders. The dark woman spoke defiantly: "Mamie may be safe within the Crystal Caves at last, but the path you seek is more impossible than you can imagine."

Impertinent was the word that came to Aubergine's mind as she locked eyes with the trespasser across the still-simmering pot.

The uninvited woman pulled off her apron, revealing an intricate waistcoat knit from kettle-dyed merino. Gathered at the bodice, the bottom fell in swinging folds of shaded black, shot with white where the dye had failed to take properly. The top was striped with alternating bands of semisolid bronze and an eerie green that matched her eyes. Stiff ruffles of ruched fabric fanned the inside of the deep V-neck collar held together beneath her breastbone by a single button encrusted with shards of cracked crystal.

No one needed to ask if the garment harbored magic. The crystal bits glittered wickedly in the light of the fire under the pot. Aubergine feigned indifference and tightened her hold around Trader's shoulders.

Esmeralde nudged Indigo Rose and lifted her chin toward the stranger. "There's our intruder," she whispered.

"Interloper," Indigo murmured back.

"Imposter," Aubergine declared firmly. "Imperious imposter."

Smokey Jo offered Lilac Lily a fearful look. “Do we know her?”

Lily nodded, but seemed afraid to answer.

Smokey gave Sierra a pleading look. “Tasman,” replied the new Keeper of the Tales. “Hiding in plain sight, as is her wont.”

“Sierra Blue,” the Dark Queen acknowledged with a nod. “Aubergine.” Her haughty eyes shifted. “Lily.” She tossed her soup-stained apron past Wheat to where Lily, the house mistress, stood. The garment crumpled to the floor, where it threatened to catch on fire from the flames licking the dyepot. “I’ll take no more instructions from you.”

Lily grabbed the smock away from the embers and said to the rest of the group, angrily, “I hired her in the marketplace. She was posing as a char girl from Coventry, seeking employ.”

Ratta gave Tasman a smoldering stare. “She is not from my homeland of Coventry, nor is she one of us.”

“Her willingness to start work that day was too convenient,” Lily said. “I should have known.”

“That’s why the vision worked when we returned with the firewood,” Smokey said. “There really were twelve of us, after all.” She peered up at Aubergine anxiously. “The Dark Queen heard the Lost Tale. She heard everything.”

A storm brewed in Aubergine’s eyes. “It could not be helped.”

“You have fooled me twice now,” Lily admitted to Tasman. “You will not fool me again.”

Tasman laughed. “You are all fools.”

“Now that you know the tale,” Sierra said, trying to keep a hint of pleasantry in her voice, “leave this place, for we have much to do.”

“Always the little peacemaker, weren’t you?” Tasman replied. She smiled at Ratta. “I didn’t come here for the Lost Yarn, although that was a nice addition.” Glittering, her green eyes shifted to Aubergine. “Where is it?”

Aubergine’s eyes flashed violet. “I shall have the necklace whole.”

Tasman shook her head. “No, old woman. You shall forfeit the missing crystal.”

“I do not harbor such a stone.” Aubergine loosened her hold on Trader only far enough to open her empty palms.

Tasman’s eyes flicked over Trader. “Little Teal, I’ve been searching for you,” she said in a singsong voice.

Wresting herself free from Aubergine’s grasp, Trader snatched up her walking stick to bar Tasman’s path. “I know,” she said bravely.

Quick as a cat, Tasman moved around the pot toward the girl. With a flick of a finger, she batted the stick from Trader’s grasp. It spun in the air and snapped in half and both pieces clattered to the floor. The invader arced her hand, letting her fingers spiral toward the girl. Her long lacquered nails clicked together. A swirl of energy transfixed Trader and jerked her from the floor. The power that radiated from Tasman’s talons lifted Trader roughly by the neck of her leather jerkin, dangled her a few inches from the floor, and drew her closer to the Dark Queen.

“I would have found you eventually,” Tasman purred. “You’re too comely for that silly boy’s disguise you were using.”

Aubergine raised her veined hands and stretched out her arms in an attempt to summon a surge of electricity that might break Tasman’s power. As Trader began to shrug out of her jerkin

in her own attempt to escape, Tasman's thumb and forefinger met and retracted, pulling the leather laces of the jacket taut, choking the young girl.

"Trader!" Lily shouted, running to aid the captive as she kicked and sputtered.

Aubergine's arthritic hands shook with the effort to muster enough force to free Trader. Over the dyepot, the air hissed and crackled between the opposed fingers of the two witches. Wheat unhooded her staff, preparing to muster the magic of its crystals to help.

Tasman held up an unlined palm. "Interfere and this young Teal will share the fate of the last one," she warned.

Wheat caught the glowing scarabs in her fist to still their sparking. Lily stopped short and shot a warning glance at Aubergine, who let her hands drop to her skirts.

"Wise choice," Tasman observed with a smug smile. "Not only fools, but paltry fools, can sometimes make wise choices." She drew the struggling girl close and held her fast. "This Teal you call Trader is coming with me. I may give her back—after she shows me the missing stone."

Tasman lifted the edge of her waistcoat and turned. In a swirl of smoke she and Trader disappeared, leaving behind only sooty traces and a choking cloud.

Wheat and Lily began to cough.

"Trader!" Skye screamed, reaching toward where her friend had been but grasping only air.

As the black fog dissipated, Smokey wiped its acrid sting from her eyes. "I would like to know what just happened," she sputtered.

“Tasman made off with our Trader, whom I call Little Teal,” Aubergine said, mildly. “She has been trying to find the girl for years. For some reason, Tasman believes that our fossiker possesses the lost amethyst that was once her aunt’s.”

“My guess is that the original Teal really has it,” Smokey grumbled. “One day you’ll open a cupboard in the root cellar or a wardrobe in the attic, and from a high, high shelf the crystal will fall on your head.”

Skye’s eyes had filled with tears. “Where did they go?”

“My guess is that Tasman will hasten to the glacier.” With a glance toward Lily, Aubergine rephrased her statement, turning into a question that Lily would then be required to answer. “Am I correct in surmising that she will waste no time seeking the Lost Caves?”

“Tasman knows that Mamie Verde now wards the ancient burial grounds,” Lily said. “Mamie was never any threat to her.”

“That was before Mamie assumed her watch,” Ratta said. “As Guardian, she won’t let Tasman pass. Even if the Dark Queen could force her way into the graveyard, the ancient voices would drive her back.”

“She may first return to the South to gather reinforcements.” Wheat recalled the band of Lowlanders she had met at the Crossed Tracks.

“Perhaps she knows an alternate entrance to the caves,” Sierra suggested, seeing again in her mind’s eye the dervish who had disappeared around the Blind Side of the glacier.

Aubergine nodded wearily. “This simmer is over.” She turned to Smokey Jo. “Douse the fire.”

With a satisfaction bordering on delight, the gnome tipped waiting buckets of water into the flames, causing billows of damp steam to rush to the ceiling. As the embers hissed,



Esmeralde hefted the wooden paddle and dipped it into the pot. With Indigo Rose's help, she lifted the steaming fiber out of the now-clear water. All the colors in the dyebath had been absorbed by the soft tendrils.

Wheat examined the brightly shaded Suri alpaca. "It really does look like Fire and Ice," she breathed. She smiled at Skye. "You will turn this into a fine yarn."

"Dry it overnight, so it will be ready to spin tomorrow," Aubergine directed Esmeralde and Indigo. "I will pattern the shawl myself, using motifs conjured to protect the wearer from the voices of the ancients." She turned to Sierra. "There is little time to tarry if you intend to reach Mamie before Tasman does."

"That may be unwise," Lily warned.

Ratta flashed Lily an impatient look. "Who's asking you?"

Wheat looked from Lily to Aubergine. "What will happen to Sierra if she enters the Crystal Caves? Will she end up trapped there like Mamie, or, worse yet, addled like Mae?"

"Not with your staff to ward her," Aubergine said.

"I am meant to go, too?" Wheat gazed around the group. "Must we all?"

Flecks of gold gleamed in Sierra's eyes. "We have little choice."

"Without Mae's knowledge of the ice passages and Ratta's comprehension of Mind Speak, we will not be able to find the Lost Caves," Aubergine said.

Esmeralde's face lit with excitement. "Are Indy and I needed as well?"

"Of course!" Indigo insisted, before Aubergine could speak. "Only I ken the properties of highland plants and herbs. And only you possess the lore to harness them to heal or harm."

Esmeralde put an arm around her friend's shoulder and gave it a merry squeeze. "Two heads are better than one."

“When both the Circle of Twelve and the necklace broke, we all knew that one day we would be called upon to pool our talents once more,” Aubergine reminded them. “Even now, the task of safeguarding all that is good and true appears unachievable. For there is one—the one we saw among us tonight—who would usurp the magic crystals and attempt to conquer nature much as the First Folk did.”

“I’ll go, if that will help,” Smokey volunteered, raising her hand. “Though I must admit I hate the cold.”

Aubergine smiled, and shook her head. “No, little one, you shall remain here by my side.” She turned to Lily. “And you.”

Lily nodded her consent, unsurprised.

Aubergine paused to consider the talents of the others. Her eyes came to rest upon Skye. “You shall stay, too. Even if our quest to rediscover the entrance to the lost caves proves successful, unlocking the secrets of the ancient crystals from the tombs beyond is uncertain.” She studied the three she had chosen. “After the others leave, we have much to do.”

“I wanted to help find Trader,” Skye protested in a small voice.

Sierra’s face was serene. “That is not your fate.”

“Do you forget there is war going on?” Wheat argued, unconvinced. “Those of us you send out on this impossible errand could be killed along the track. By either side!”

“Yours is not a fool’s journey.” Aubergine shot the shepherdess a hard glance. “Forget about the war between the North and the South. The foolish North believes that the Lowlanders seek nothing more than water rights, which is a lie. Under the guise of wresting water from the glacier, Tasman secretly searches for the magic crystals. She doesn’t care who wins the war, or who lives or dies, as long as in the end she alone harbors the secrets of the Crystal Caves.”

“Then we all may wish we had died in fire or ice,” Ratta grumbled.

Lavender Mae uttered a plaintive “Mae,” and buried her face in Sierra’s shawl.

“Heed her, for she is not mindless,” Aubergine advised, as Sierra began to pry Mae gently but firmly from her shoulder. “Much is sane within Mae’s addled brain. The First Folk murmur to her so often that she can do naught but cry out.”

“Mae always looked to the stones for answers.” Wheat gave Lily a questioning glance. “Why?”

“It’s simple.” Lily watched Sierra brush Mae’s wispy white hair back from her jittering eyes. “She understands that rejoining the necklace can restore power to the Circle of Twelve once more.”

“And it will.” Aubergine said. “We need to find that amethyst.”

“The necklace Tasman took had a string of eleven stones,” Indigo pointed out. “Our time might be better spent looking for that.”

“A string is not a circle!” Aubergine said angrily.

With a sidelong glance at Aubergine, Mae scuttled away in alarm.

Aubergine sighed. “If Tasman had the necklace in her possession, she would certainly not have left here without it.” The old woman yawned. “Get some rest, everyone. Tomorrow will be a busy day. We will need to prepare those who are going for the journey into the Northlands.”

Without a word, Wheat took up her shepherd’s crook and stomped upstairs to tend the Jacob ram she was keeping in her room. Ratta turned to follow, but paused in the parlor doorway at the foot of the stairs. The front of the room where the viewing table holding Mamie’s body had been was empty. The vases of lilies to either side were wilted and the candles burned to nubs. Making sure no one could see her, Ratta stepped inside and softly closed the pocket doors

behind her. With her back against the wall, she slumped to the floor in the soothing darkness, welcoming the tears that washed down her cheeks.

Skye hurried up the hall to the kitchen to catch up with Warren, for she knew he'd have plenty of tales for her and Garth. In spite of all the turmoil, her step was light at the thought that she, her mother, and her two brothers had all been reunited, at least for a short while. A prickle at the back of her brain reached out to wonder where her father was, but she simply had to assume he was all right and to focus on the work she'd been given here.

Just beyond the scorched doorway to the dyeshed, Sierra and Lily stepped into an alcove to talk in earnest, pausing only when Aubergine swept past to retire to her private chambers. Alone but for Lavender Mae, who seemed preoccupied with the shards of amethyst crystal that had spilled across the floor from the broken hourglass, Esmeralde and Indigo spread the damp alpaca fleece carefully over the drying rack.

When they had finished, the two slipped out the dyeshed's secret entrance to revisit their childhood haunt in the back alley. "Too bad about that Trader," Indigo said. She lit a smoke. "That little fossik boy was starting to grow on me."

Esmeralde unstopped her flask of cordial. "Trader was a girl," she reminded Indigo, taking a nip.

Indigo reached for the flask. "Yes, I liked him."

Mae stayed behind in the shed, scuffing through the shards of crystal on the floor. She paused to turn over the splintered pieces of Trader's walking stick with the toe of her boot. The dull purple stone that had decorated the top interested her. It had come loose from its bindings. Mae picked at the strips of leather that had lashed the crystal into place. The stone dropped into her hand.

“Mae?” She ran practiced fingers across the rough underside of the stone, which had been tied jagged side down, to buffer its sharp edges. She plopped cross-legged on the floor to further examine the broken crystal.

She studied the rock from all angles. Then she lifted the heavy pouch of stones from her neck. She pried the drawstring open.

Carefully she raised a long length of amethyst gems set in tarnished silver from the pouch and fit the one from Trader’s walking stick into the bit of ragged stone still left in the twisted silver setting. The pointed edge of the cracked crystal matched the sunken nub seamlessly.

“Ohhhhhh....” Mae’s mouth dropped open.

In the shadows cast by the candlelight, she blinked at the circlet of twelve amethyst stones. “Oh yes!” She began to shriek. “Yes! Yes Mae! Yes Mamie! Yes Aubergine!”

Suddenly, she clamped a hand tight over her mouth. Sitting stark still, she peered warily toward the open doorway, watching and listening. The hallway was empty. The only voices she heard beside those murmuring in her head came from the kitchen.

Quickly and quietly, Mae pulled one stone after another out of her pouch, placing each silently on the floor as she removed it. When she had emptied the bag, she surveyed her collection. Several crystals were about the same shape or color as the lost gem, but none was its twin. Mae did what she always did in such cases: she chose a near-matching rock at random. Hunched over Trader’s broken walking stick, she stole furtive glances toward the door as she nimbly lashed the replacement amethyst in place and laid the walking stick back where it had fallen. Mae began to sift the loose crystals back into her pouch, but changed her mind and dumped them onto the floor, secreting within the bag only the silver string with its now-twelve

amethysts. She slung the pouch back around her neck, surprised at how light it had become. Standing, she gazed wistfully at the small pile of stones on the floor.

“Mae,” she waved in farewell. But that didn’t seem right. Stepping over the stones to the great pot, she looked within. The water was clear and still steaming. Over it hung a thick veil of green haze. Did she dare?

Mae scooped up the loose amethyst crystals with both hands and dropped them into the dyepot. They disappeared into its depths.

With a shrug, Mae left the dyeshed and tripped down the empty hall toward the staircase, unmindful of the fog that followed her up the stairs.