

SCENE #1

The familiar sights of my family's living room surround me as I lie on the couch, tossing and turning with fever. Sweat glistens on my burning cheeks and blood soaks the pillow beneath my head. Standing over me are my mother and father, sharing worried glances. Despite my efforts to speak to them—to tell them I'm alright—all I can manage are agonized moans and strangled coughs. Godfrey grips one of my trembling hands, and when I look to him, my mind clears. I'm filled with something akin to tranquility. Though I know that it isn't true, I feel safe. Warm. But also very, very scared.

"Godfrey," I wheeze, "please don't leave me."

"Never," he replies softly.

And then it happens—pain stabs into my chest like a dagger and my lungs won't take in air. The room spins until the world begins to fade. As everything slips away, that tranquility slips with it. Replaced by an overwhelming feeling of betrayal.

He said he wouldn't leave. Never, he said. But I'm leaving and he isn't coming with me.

The last thing I process as I'm ripped from life is Mother's ear-piercing scream.

I gasped, eyes flying open. Tears dripped down my cheeks and despite the cold room, I was sweating. It was the nightmare that had plagued me almost every night since my mother died. That look in Godfrey's eyes haunted even my waking hours. So filled with promises now broken. Curling up into a ball, I listened to the scrapes and bangs that echoed through the room. Though they weren't exactly pleasant, they were far better than the images my brain was conjuring. I tried to force my breath steady—willed my heartbeat to slow. But the sound of my

own ragged breaths brought back memories I had tried so hard to suppress. My thoughts wandered into the shadowy depths of my brain, until only one thought remained.

Mother had been so excited for another child.

She came to me first, when she realized. She hadn't bled for two months, and though she had had multiple miscarriages in the past, she just knew that this time was different. *"I can sense it, Minerva. It's finally happened."*

She made as many little dresses as she could, so many that Father built a new chest of drawers just to have space to keep them. After that, a whole nursery was put together for my unborn sibling. I helped Mother paint the walls into a fantastical forest, while Godfrey helped Father refurbish the old crib, which had held nearly every baby in Father's family since it was built by his great-grandmother. Mother looked at names, next. She decided on Richard, if it was a boy, and Cynthia, if a girl. Father wanted another boy, but Mother would have been content either way. Godfrey promised me every night that little Richard-or-Cynthia would never take my place as his favorite family member. I told him I couldn't promise anything.

Then the illness came.

Mother was so certain the baby wouldn't be affected. She had always been such an optimist. That part of her was all but crushed when she woke up in a puddle of blood. She screamed so loud the whole neighborhood woke. The doctor came as fast as he could, but it was too late; that night, she gave birth to my dead baby brother. Through the crack in the door, I saw him, lying still in the doctor's arms. He was so tiny. His skin, which should have been pink, was dark purple. Poor little Richard. I always wondered what sort of life he would have had, if he'd only lived.

Mother clawed at her baby. Father had to hold her back as the tiny corpse was carried away. Those screams still lurk in the back of my mind—so shrill and so unlike my sweet mother. That's when I was sure she wouldn't make it. Whether it would be the illness or the grief to take her, I wasn't certain. But I knew that I was going to lose her.

SCENE #2

The rain poured down upon the labyrinth, soaking my dress and making my shoes squelch. Thick gray clouds blocked the sun, submerging the moor in darkness. Still, I worked. At the very least, I was in pleasant company. Bridget, Nanny, and Phoebe raked up leaves, while Dorcas and Adah picked up sticks and other debris. Working beside me was Sally, expertly pruning the unruly green walls. The seven of us tried our best to keep our conversation away from the events of the night before.

“I wonder what Mr. Dougherty wants this old thing cleaned up for,” Bridget said.

“That stuck-up son-of-a-bitch probably just wants to look like he actually cares,” Phoebe muttered, gathering leaves with a vicious fervor that could only be sparked by pure hatred.

Dorcas patted her shoulder. “Now, now, Phoebe. Look on the bright side: if Mr. Dougherty looks good in the eyes of society, maybe he’ll treat us better.”

“I doubt it.”

The way they spoke about Mr. Daugherty made it seem as though he didn’t like us at all. He was cold and intimidating when I met him, and he *had* seemed like he hated children, but I figured he had just been having a bad day or something. How could a person charged with providing for a group of children not care about them? Why would one bother spending all of that time and money, if they weren’t doing it because they wanted to? With this new information, though, a lot of things began to make sence. Why we always starved, while Mr. Dougherty seemed so well fed; why our clothes were ill-fitting and ragged, while his were well tailored and expensive. Mr. Dougherty was spending as little money on us as he could, leaving us to suffer while he thrived. We were an inconvenience to him, not something he was doing out of the goodness of his heart.

Adah dropped the sticks she was carrying and surveyed the scenery around us. “You could take nice photographs in here.”

“Oh, but they’d be so dreary!” Nanny replied while scooping up an armful of soggy leaves.

“No, they’d be *spooky*.”

Adah draped herself dramatically against the wet wall, making a face as though she was a damsel in distress and lifting her chin to the side to display her long neck.

“Don’t I look just as though I’d be the victim of some awful vampire?”

Phoebe rolled her eyes. “Oh, yes, I’m sure those mysterious creatures of the night who have had centuries to refine their tastes would just *drool* over you.”

“And Phoebe knows what she’s talking about,” Bridget added, “after all, she is one.”

Dorcas snorted. “I often wondered why she hates the sun.”

Adah nodded thoughtfully. “That *would* explain why she’s so broody.”

“And so violent,” Nanny agreed with a giggle.

“And why she’s always staring so longingly at—”

Before Sally could finish whatever she was going to say, Phoebe silenced her with a sharp glare. It really was a shame, as I was very curious as to what she was going to say; I had never seen Phoebe staring at anyone besides Priscilla, and the only longing there was the longing for a fight. Phoebe cleared her throat and looked away from Sally. Only to turn to me.

“Minnie, please watch what you’re cutting.”

Glittering in the wet of the rain, her concern-filled eyes were so pretty. Though the look in them made it clear there was something else I should be doing, I couldn’t help but be enchanted. The flecks of red were more prominent than usual, weaving between the strands of

brown like threads through fabric. Long black lashes framed them like kohl—lashes the color of glittering obsidian. Much like that obsidian, born from lava, Phoebe was fiery and rough, elegant and—

“Minnie, your fingers!”

At the sound of Phoebe’s shout, I looked down to see that I had very nearly sliced three of said fingers off. Quickly, I pulled my hand away from the blades of my rusty scissors. Despite trying to push them back, thoughts of the last time I cut myself flooded my mind: the blood wet and dripping down my palm, leaving a thick crimson trail. How foreign it seemed, even though it was coming from inside of me. It’s so strange, really—our blood and bones are always there, but it’s so startling to see them.

I shook my head, desperately trying to clear my mind. I didn’t cut myself this time. There had been no blood.

SCENE #3

Adah and I worked together to carry our overflowing bucket of leaves out to the dumping pile, which Miss Hornby decided to locate much farther into the moor than I had ever before been, and much farther than my legs wanted to go. The bucket was heavy and my arms ached. One would think that leaves would be light, but with the additional weight of the water, it was like Adah and I were lugging around a small child.

“You ever seen a play, Minnie?”

Adah had been trying to chat since we started walking, and as much as I wasn’t much of a conversationalist, I appreciated the distraction.

“My father took me to see *Twelfth Night* once.”

“Oh, that must have been such fun! I’ve always wanted to see a comedy.”

“Maybe you will, someday.”

“I suppose. Oh, or maybe I’ll *star* in one!”

Suddenly very excited, Adah dropped her side of the bucket and began frolicking about. “Oh, Minnie, come dance with me!”

I looked around to make sure no teachers were watching. Though I very much wanted to have some fun, I was a bit nervous about being caught. After deciding that we were far enough away from everyone as not to be seen, I set the bucket on the ground—much to my arms’ approval—and joined Adah. It didn’t take her more than a second to grab my hands and begin twirling me about.

“Fortune forbid my outside have not charmed her! She made good view of me, indeed so much that sure methought her eyes had lost her tongue, for she did speak in starts distractedly. She loves me, sure!”

As Adah twirled me around and around, quoting Shakespeare with startling accuracy, my worries were all but forgotten, and I could hardly tell anymore that I was soaked to the bone and dreadfully cold. Was this what having friends felt like—so dizzying and thrilling, one could hardly remember their troubles?

“Having fun without us?”

I whipped around, half expecting to see an angry teacher standing behind me, but it was just Bridget, standing with her hands on her hips in mock disapproval. Dorcas rolled her eyes, while Nanny came running over, having since recovered from her coughing fit.

“Oh, spin me ‘round like that, Adah, would you?”

She and Adah broke into a fit of giggles as they danced about. Sally watched on, a strange mix of concern and amusement on her face. Meanwhile, Phoebe ignored the twirling girls all together, instead approaching me with a sort of playful look.

“Weren’t you two supposed to come right back?”

I shrugged slightly, feeling a bit ashamed for shirking our duties. “We were sidetracked.”

“I can see that.”

The look in Phoebe’s eyes was captivating. They sparkled with a mischievous excitement—a look that was just so *her*.

“Hey, Dorcas!” she called over her shoulder, “Bet I can carry Minnie faster than you can carry Bridge!”

Sally shook her head. “That wouldn’t be fair, considering the weight ratios and—”

“Don’t care!” Phoebe replied while turning around and scooping me onto her back.

I gave a startled squeal and flung my arms around Phoebe’s neck as she began running across the moor. Despite the added weight, she was quite fast. This fact clearly didn’t please

Dorcas, who all but tossed Bridget over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes as she raced to catch up.

Wind slammed violently against my face as I clung to Phoebe for dear life. The rain still poured down, making the ground more of a great big puddle of mud, and I knew that Phoebe was going to slip eventually, taking me down with her. She didn't seem nearly as worried, though, laughing hysterically as she raced for an old tree maybe ten meters away. Dorcas was gaining on us—or at least, that's what it sounded like, since Bridget's dramatic cries to be put down grew continuously louder. Despite how worried I was for our safety, the whole thing was so exhilarating. I couldn't remember the last time I'd done anything like it—probably not since Godfrey and I were children.

As I predicted, Phoebe slipped just before reaching the tree. She fell face-first into the mud and I followed mere seconds later. Though she was there to cushion my fall, I still managed to slam my nose against the ground.

“Guess I win,” Dorcas said, smiling smugly down at Phoebe (with Bridget still dangling over her shoulder).

Sitting up, I spat out a mouthful of mud. My nose ached and I had a massive headache, but, somehow, I was still enjoying myself. There was just something about playing around with my friends that overshadowed any negative emotions.

“Hey, Minnie,” came a muffled voice from underneath me, “could you move?”

I gasped and jumped up. I had forgotten Phoebe was there. She rolled over onto her back and, despite being drenched in mud and probably in a lot of pain, she was laughing. Something about her was different than usual. She looked... happy. Carefree. It was strange seeing her like that.

“You know,” Sally said, an amused glint in her eyes, “I don’t see what’s so funny about falling on your face.”

“Was certainly funny from where I’m standing,” Adah snorted.

I looked over at the other three girls, who had at some point come to join us by the tree. Nanny was staring down at Phoebe with concern, but the other two didn’t seem to care much about the fall the two of us had endured. They, too, seemed happier than I had ever seen them. It was as though, out here in the moor, far enough that we could barely see the garden through the rain and fog, all troubles were forgotten. As though we were all just normal people, enjoying the stormy weather. It reminded me of the way my mother would stand out in the pouring rain, backlit by lightning, trying to prove to my young self that thunderstorms were nothing to be afraid of. She looked so pretty, with raindrops dripping from her hair and laughter in her eyes. Her outstretched arms and wide smile were always so welcoming, despite the fact that running to them meant running into the storm. She was like that—could convince anyone anything, with just a single smile.

SCENE #4

The schoolroom was much like the dining room, with its high ceiling and tall windows. Stained glass panels let in glittering light, illuminating the rows of desks in a rainbow of hues. In each of the four corners was a chalkboard and a stack of books so dusty, they could have been the sole culprit for the air thick enough to choke on. The room was noisy, too—there were so many conversations going on at once, all weaving together until one voice was indistinguishable from the next.

Only some of the desks were occupied; the rest of the girls were spread out across the room. As was the case for the small group that I had joined. Phoebe, Bridget, Dorcas, and I sat in a circle on the floor, an assortment of pebbles and a deck of cards (which had been “borrowed” from Miss Hornby) sitting between us.

Bridget picked up the deck and began leisurely shuffling. “You know how to play draw poker, Minnie?”

I nodded, thinking back on all the late nights Godfrey and I spent up in the attic, playing cards by candlelight. We played all sorts of games, but poker was Godfrey’s favorite (*thinking back, he probably had a bit of a gambling problem*).

Bridget started dealing, throwing cards at us one-by-one. “Good. Usual stakes then, girls—losers take the winner’s chores. Phoebe can start us off.”

Once she finished dealing the cards, Bridget handed out the pebbles. With that, the game began. Once we fell into a rhythm of bets, draws, and show downs, Dorcas turned to me.

“What class are you in?”

After I stared blankly at her for a moment, she elaborated: “We’re split into four classes. Did they tell you anything about how things work here?”

I shrugged. “Not much.”

Having found this out, Dorcas and Bridget got to work teaching me the ins and outs of Heartwood life. Phoebe focussed mostly on the game, but she added the occasional comment. After maybe twenty minutes, Bridget was winning by a landslide and I had all the basic information I needed to go about my next few years here. It was a relief to know I wouldn’t be going into everything blind.

“I bet six,” Dorcas said, throwing a handful of little pebbles into the pot.

“I’ll raise four,” Bridget said, tossing in two big pebbles. “It was so loud last night.”

Peeking down at my pathetic hand, I sighed. “Drop.”

“The ghosts must have been pissed,” Phoebe said. “I raise two.”

I shivered at the thought of the sounds that had kept me up half the night. “Is that normal?”

“Unfortunately, yes, although they’re usually a bit quieter,” Dorcas replied, throwing six more pebbles in. “I call.”

“Maybe they hate you, Minnie,” Bridget suggested. “I call, too.”

“I’ll drop,” Phoebe said, “and I doubt that. It’s probably nothing.”

“Maybe,” Bridget shrugged. “Either way, it’s a pain. I was really hoping to get *some* sleep after Maidlow made us scrub those pots yesterday.”

As if at the sound of her name, Mrs. Maidlow’s shrill voice pierced through the room. “Lunch!”

Bridget grinned. “Alright, Dorcas, let’s wrap this up. What’ve you got?”

The two threw down their hands.

“Take that!” Dorcas laughed, “Royal flush!”

Bridget stared down at the cards in disbelief. “What? How?!”

Dorcas shrugged. “Talent.”

Bridget scowled as she packed up the cards. “More like luck. This is the first time you’ve won in months.”

As Bridget continued grumbling about the loss of her winning streak, the rest of us cleaned up. The whole room was a frenzy of girls putting away their little games, books, and art supplies. Not that there was much to be put away: anything available for us to use was just castoffs from wealthy children or fashioned out of whatever could be found outside.

Once we finished, Phoebe grabbed my hand.

“Come on,” she said, “there won’t be anything left to eat if we aren’t quick.”

SCENE #5

The wind howled as it slipped through the cracks in the windows, nearly drowning out the chatter of the girls around me. There were only about twenty minutes left until we went out searching for the ghosts. The closer we got to going out, the more nervous I became. What sort of idiot went *looking* for the thing they wanted to be rid of? Moreover, I—and most likely the others, too—knew nothing about ghosts, nor how to hunt for them. It couldn't be as simple as just going out and finding them, right? There had to be more to it.

As I lamented, a small, vampiric figure caught my eye. Lettice, combing through her knotted hair, was walking over to me. She gave a small, chilling smile when our eyes met.

“Hello, Minerva. Victoria has a message for you.”

Victoria. The name gave me an idea. Somehow, Lettice was able to communicate with ghosts—so much so that she was friends with one. If Lettice spoke to Victoria on a regular basis, who was to say she didn't talk to other ghosts, too? This whole time, she could very well have been having afternoon tea with my tormentors. That was an unpleasant thought, but it did mean that she would know more about them than I did. At the very least, she had to know *something*.

“I need to talk, too,” I said.

Lettice cocked her head. “What about?”

It took me a moment to figure out what to say (*how does one word such things?*), but eventually I replied: “The ghosts of the boys who died here.”

Lettice shook her head. “No, I'm afraid not. I do, however, know quite a bit about ghostly activity, if that would be of any help.”

“Do you know anything about ghost hunting?”

“I do. I've been several times, actually. I could give you some tips?”

“Please.”

Lettice gave a small smile, and something resembling excitement filled her usually emotionless eyes. “Alright. First, there will always be some places that are more active than others, so you had best go someplace you know they frequent. It will also do you well to have some sort of offering.”

“What kind of offering?”

“Something they had some sort of emotional connection with while they were alive. If you do not have anything like that, then you can lure them out by messing with something familiar—ghosts tend to be against any sort of change.

“It may take a very long time for the spirits to make their presence known, so you’ll need to be patient. While you wait, be friendly and introduce yourself. If you are dealing with benevolent spirits, this will make them feel more comfortable around you. Or, if you have a malevolent spirit on your hands, this will feel like an invitation to either haunt or possess you. Either way, you’ll get a reaction.

“If none of that works, then you may try to rile the spirits up—threaten them, tell them you don’t believe in them, invite them to harm you, etc. However, this should only be used as a last resort, as it could be very dangerous, especially if you are unknowingly dealing with some sort of demonic entity.”

“A...demon?” I asked, trying (and failing) to keep my voice from trembling.

Lettice nodded gravely. I had asked her for advice with hopes that being better prepared would make me less nervous, but it had had the opposite effect. Now I wasn’t only afraid to go out looking for the ghosts, but also terrified to merely be in the same vicinity as them. The possibility that we might be dealing with something genuinely evil hadn’t even crossed my mind.

The ghosts were frightening, yes, but certainly not to *that* degree. Not before, anyway. Now, the idea wouldn't leave my head. Those lifeless eyes seemed so much more malicious than when I first saw them; the frostbite eating away at their fingers and noses felt like a warning.

“Oh, and Minerva,” Lettice said quietly.

“Yes?” I asked, praying she didn't have anything else to unveil.

“Be careful. Victoria senses danger in the near future.”