



Backwards
Moon



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Summary: When the magical veil that protects their valley from humans is breached and the Wellspring Water needed to repair it is polluted, it is up to two young witches, Bracken and Nettle, to save the coven.

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For DCL,

Witchfriend extraordinaire then, now, and always



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chapter one

It was a good day for flying: pale blue sky, wispy clouds, gentle updrafts. It was also the last ordinary day before everything changed forever.

Nettle didn't know that, but then, you never do.

Bracken, her cousin, wanted to visit the marmots. "We can just *talk* to them," said Bracken. "What's wrong with sitting and talking?"

"On a day like this?" said Nettle. "On a *perfect* day for the Raven Game?"

"Fine." Bracken sighed as they glided over the Least and Middle Meadows. Soon they were flying toward slopes of bare, tumbled rock.

Like all witches, they had deep violet-blue eyes and black hair. They wore it in two long braids, which was the way you did before you turned fifteen. Nettle was small and quick and stubborn. Bracken, even though she was older and taller, tended not to argue with her.

They flew higher, toward dark fir forests. In the distance

rose the jagged, snowy tips of the mountains that ringed the valley.

“You call the ravens,” said Nettle. “You’re better at it.”

Bracken gave a piercing whistle. A moment later, four ravens lifted out of the forest.

“Nice,” said Nettle softly. She and Bracken bowed their tall-pointed hats in greeting, then ravens and witches spiraled upward into the dome of the sky.

Nettle liked the Raven Game. There was a rhythm to it: dive, soar, dive. Nettle’s stomach always dropped thrillingly before she shot back upward. Sometimes as they dove they let themselves tumble over and over in the air. The ravens always laughed their throaty raven laughs, their claws extended in a most undignified fashion. They did it over and over again, until everyone but Nettle tired of it. Then the ravens looked at each other, gave a few parting caws, and flapped away.

“Did you ever notice how they never say anything?” said Bracken. “I wish at least *sometimes* we could talk to them.”

“You can’t talk to ravens,” said Nettle. “They won’t stay still long enough.”

“I wish there were some combination of ravens and marmots.”

Nettle raised her eyebrows. “Flying marmots? Tunneling ravens?”

“You know what I mean,” said Bracken soberly. “Someone who would talk to us *and* be fun to play with.”

“Yes. Well,” said Nettle, looking away. They hovered for a minute, their faces still, and Nettle knew they were both thinking the same thing: how all the other witches in the valley were long past any kind of game except the kind you play sitting around a table after supper. They were not just old, they were *very* old. Some were hundreds of years old.

It was late now. Shadows had spread across the rock slopes. Soon the mountains would be silhouetted against the glowing sky, their snowy tips tinged with pink. “Maybe tomorrow we can play Catapult,” said Nettle. “Catapult works fine with just two.”

Bracken nodded and pulled her black hat low on her forehead. Not to stop it falling off, because it wouldn’t, being magic. It was just something she did when she was thinking about *The Way Things Were*. Nettle pulled hers down too. Then with one motion, they wheeled their broomsticks toward home.



chapter two

Nettle and Bracken followed a stream, silver in the fading light. It flowed through thickets of willow bushes, then dropped to the clear pools where the two of them often swam. Lower still, the stream widened to a river that wound in broad bends across the valley floor. When they came to Five Herons Marsh, they turned due east. Then they slowed their brooms and skimmed above the forest.

It was dark now, but with their Nightseeing, Nettle and Bracken could make out an open spot just ahead. They glided low over pumpkin vines and rows of corn. In the daylight, the cornstalks would be tawny and the pumpkins golden, but now they looked gray, yet clear in every detail, the way things did with Nightseeing.

In another moment Nettle could make out stone roofs, cone-shaped like witches' hats, here and there among the oak branches. Crooked chimneys and many-paned gable windows glinted palely in the starlight.

Nettle and Bracken landed on the small, circular clearing

that was the village Commons and swung off their broomsticks. The scent of wood smoke lingered pleasantly in the air. From a front porch a distant banjo twanged, clear and merry, mixing with the faint murmur of old voices and high, cracked laughter.

Nettle and Bracken ran lightly across the Commons and up their own front steps. No light shone inside, which meant that their Great-Aunt Iris was out on somebody else's porch. Their aunt, who loved them dearly but tended to forget things, would be home when she thought of it.

Nettle and Bracken pushed open the door. A pot of lentil stew, now cold, sat on the back of the stove. Still, Nettle liked lentils, and it wouldn't take long to warm them up. She piled wood and kindling, lit them with a spark from her finger, and shut the stove door with a clang.

Bracken put on the kettle for meadow-mint tea and lit the lantern that hung above the table. It made a warm, golden light—much cheerier than gray Nightseeing.

Nettle ate her supper quickly, thinking about which aspen grove they should go to the next day and how to choose the right sapling, with just the right springiness. She imagined the biggest rock they could fling and the clatter and boom it would make as it bounced crazily down the slopes. . . . Catapult was a fine, fine game.

They washed the dishes—it was too bad that magic wouldn't stoop to bothersome everyday tasks—and set them back in the cupboard. Nettle went out on the porch to toss the dishwater out, *whoosh*, and stood for a moment. Above her untold numbers of stars glittered among the oaks' crooked branches. The Cat's Highway arched through them, a starry path that seemed to come from, and go to, the world on the other side of the mountains. As she often did, Nettle imagined

herself flying along it. Then she went inside, her bare feet padding softly on the wooden floor, and climbed the ladder to the sleeping loft she shared with her cousin.

Bracken was already in bed, reading the *Cyclopedia of World History* by the light of a single candle. It was the only human-made book in the entire village. Bracken had read it over and over.

Nettle had read it too, though only once. She'd studied all the pictures.

"Where are you now?" Nettle asked as she hung her hat on the bedpost.

"The part where they invent the steam locomotive and the telegraph," said Bracken. So she was nearly at the end.

Nettle stepped out of her dress and left it lying on the floor.

"You're not going to brush your hair?" said Bracken without looking up.

"No," said Nettle, and slipped into bed. She waited while Bracken read the last few pages of the book, which were all about Onward and Upward and the bright future of Mankind from this glorious day forward.

Bracken closed the book and stared into the distance, picking absently at the blanket on her lap. Nettle could tell from her troubled look that Bracken was thinking about their parents and where they had gone.

Nettle's and Bracken's fathers—like all witches' fathers—were Woodfolk. When a Woodfolk man and a witch got married, their children were always tiny witches, with dark violet-blue eyes and spikey black hair. But long ago, when Nettle and Bracken were only babies, their fathers had vanished, along with the entire Woodfolk tribe. Their mothers had gone looking for them, and then they too had vanished.

And ever since, no one would ever talk about it.