

Liminal Day

By David Allen Jones

“Kyr, shhhh, Kyr, wake up.”

Kyras sprang instantly to awareness under the soft pressure of hands as, in a rush, she remembered that today she would either become a witch or spend the rest of her worthless life wishing she had.

The air about her was chilled and darkness lay like cold earth inside her parents’ one-room cabin. The only light came from a single candle held aloft by her father.

“It’s midnight,” he whispered.

“Your Liminal day,” said Momma.

“Now?”

“At dawn,” said Dida. “We wanted to speak with you while there was still time.”

“You know what my test will be?”

“No,” whispered Momma. “Every test the Sages give is different, you know that.”

Momma, who had been a Gorn before she married Dida, could have been a witch of the Old Lines. Gorn women had been and birthed some of the greatest Sages in history, but their house had lost its prestige over the last eight generations as it produced weaker and fewer witches. Momma had no magic at all.

“But I can tell you this, my love,” whispered Momma. “No matter what task they set before you, you need only break the Witch’s Barrier”.

“What’s that?”

“A spell placed on all potential witches at birth. It separates you from your magic. Puts you at one remove from it the way standing on a stone holds you out of a stream. The Sages use it to keep little ones from wreaking havoc before they are trained. Can you imagine a three-year-old Maggie Cold-Hands blasting the world with lightning every time she had a fit?”

“But how do I break it if I can’t use my magic against it?”

“The Sages know you -- know your mind and your potential. Whatever they ask of you will be your way of breaking the barrier. Your key. “

“It won’t be easy,” said Dida. “And there’s no shame in failing.”

“None,” whispered Momma.

But Kyras could read the lie in her mother's eyes.

#

Kyras’s knees hurt. Three hours ago the Prior Sage, dressed all in black save for her green habit, had escorted her into the Temple of Ashe, made her to kneel on the cold, hard flagstones before the fire pit in the great hall, and commanded her to, “Make this flame speak.”

The flame in question was a small sliver of yellow, dancing merrily upon a pine branch. Kyras could see that it would soon exhaust its fuel and die for it had nearly eaten through the dry wood.

“You may feed it as you wish,” said the stern, jowly old woman, gesturing towards three wooden boxes before the hearth each filled with a different type of kindling.

Her spare instructions given, the Sage promptly eased her bulk into a large chair to watch Kyras’s progress. Unfortunately, thus far, there had been no progress. She had burned scraps of dried leaves, bark and twigs, but no amount of fuel, nor earnest wishing on Kyras’s part, had yet coaxed the little flame to speak.

For the first two hours Kyras had concentrated on the tiny fire with unwavering intensity, searching her mind and heart for some wellspring of magic. She even waved her hands and tried saying some magical-sounding words, but to no avail. All that concentration only gave her a throbbing headache.

But not even that pain had deterred Kyras until these last few minutes when despair began to steal over her. How much time would the Sage give her? Surely she would soon pronounce Kyras a failure and have her escorted from the Temple never to return.

Kyras’s eyes fell away from the flame. She wasn’t going to let it die, not while any of the kindling remained, but for the moment she could not bare to watch it any longer.

As her gaze shifted about the room Kyras noticed that the gray-stone hearth was quite clean. Lesser witches, apprentices and acolytes, must be made to scrub it. One of them had even placed a Yoter sapling near the kindling boxes. Its red and yellow blossoms smelled fragrant, almost soothing. Whatever woman had planted it must have plenty of time on her hands. Yoters were notorious for needing water. Between that and soaping these stones, the apprentices must spend half their time trucking water basins –

Kyras jerked as if someone had pinched her. She crawled forward on sleep-prickled legs to peer down at the little sapling, her mind racing with a sudden, wild thought.

Could she do this? Would the witches allow it? Kyras stole a glance at the Prior who sat stone-faced, watching her.

Quickly, before she lost her nerve, Kyras fed the little flame a handful of leaves and bark and even fanned it a bit with her tattered brown skirts. Then, her heart pounding, she rent the Yoter from top to bottom, tearing out its roots and exposing its tender, green insides.

She had nothing to cut the living wood so she simply placed it atop the now lively flame roots and all.

“Speak!”

Kyras blew upon the fire as it began to lick at the wet wood. She bent over it, rocking back and forth, reaching inside herself to the magic she knew must exist there – had to exist there. The pain in her head doubled then trebled. She ignored it.

“SPEAK!”

Blood trickled, unfelt, from Kyras’s nose. A drop fell upon the Yoter wood, mixing with the water there which had already begun to boil and steam.

Under flame the green wood whistled and whined and popped as Kyras continued to rock, repeating her mantra, “Speak. Speak. Speak.”

The great hall grew cold, and colder still. Kyras’s breath steamed.

Time passed -- Kyras could never say how much -- and then the flame’s undulations slowed until it moved like ink dropped in water.

From the fire’s sibilant, whistling depths arose a sibilant, whistling voice.

“Well done, little witch.”