

A Gold Spring



by Sorchia DuBois

*Witches, magic, and romance in a short
fantasy story.*



Episode 1: *A Cherry Tomato*

A cherry tomato.

That's what I want.

I've craved it for the entire cold, dark winter. The subtle pop as the marble-sized, red globe separates from the calyx. The delectable crunch between the teeth and the sweet explosion of tangy, blood-warm juice. A fresh-picked, sun-warmed, red, ripe cherry tomato.

But Spring is late and my spindly plants need more light. The sky today—as nearly every day of my exile—threatens a cold rain. I mound mud around the delicate stems, patting gently.

Solanum lycopersicum of the variety *cerasiforme* cultivated by the Aztecs in the fifth century and brought to Europe by Hernán Cortés in 1521—unless Christopher Columbus beat him to it nearly twenty years earlier—valued for soups and sauces, elegant in salads, and a distant relative of the deadly nightshade—belladonna—the witch's herb. Hairy stem and dog-toothed leaves prickle my palm, their pungent odor a greeting and a warning.

A flutter in my belly reminds me I've crouched in the garden for far too long. I sit back on the soggy ground, lift my shirt, and inspect my distended abdomen. A tiny foot-shaped bulge blossoms beside my flattened, stretched navel. She doesn't like being cramped and she's not shy about letting me know.

With a rolling undulation from one side of my belly to the other, she curls into a comfortable ball. I caress the firm mound where she nestles just out of reach, moving my hand over her indistinct outline.

"Not long now," I whisper to her.





"It will be alright," I whisper to myself.

A chilly wind fingers the back of my neck. The fine hair on my arms prickles and a buzz in my head drowns out the cawing crows. Between one breath and the next, a vision rises from the garden mud. Beyond my control, these visions have visited me often in recent months-- horrifying replays of devastation and death.

The phantasm twists it's tendrils in my hair before I can run, unfurls fronds of color and light and fear, holds me in a sticky embrace. All I can do is clutch the ragged tufts of last year's grass and hold on.

Episode 2: Burning

Flames fill the castle windows, acrid smoke streams from the turrets. Heat flushes my face, glitters in the crystals sewn into my gown, scorches me through the gauzy fabric. Soft ash filters onto my face and embers bounce across the gravel path between the castle keep and the gates.

Maddock is somewhere inside. I gather my skirts and trot toward the massive doors of the castle keep. We'll live or die together. The crystal slippers slide on gravel when a sharp warning cry rings out from above

"Run for the forest, Allium." Maddock stands atop the gate tower, a shadow against the moon-bright sky. "Run. I'll find you."

A gentle push on my back, a warm caress on my cheek—half fancied and half magic—and he is gone.

Despite his plea, I linger, mired in indecision.

Inside my head, Lucia's mocking voice repeats Maddock's words.

"Run, Allium. I'll find you. I'll find you both."





Like a strand of spider silk, Lucia's spell falls from the heights of the burning tower. Instinctively, my fingers coil above the pure, sweet atom of life in my belly. I wrap the spark in a satin shield, but Lucia's magic is potent. I can't hold the protective glamour for long. Escape is my only choice now.

Out the castle gates I fly. Magic snaps at my heels, loosed by a foe beyond my craft.

The broad road leading to the forest glimmers red, reflecting the fire. My discarded silver slippers flash as they tumble into rushing stream beside the road. I run for the dark, cool shadow of the forest. Gravel bites my bare feet. The train of the crystallized gown streams behind me, catching on stones and twigs. Not losing a step, I rip the delicate fabric and fling it aside. I run until my knees wobble and my breaths come in gasps.

At last, sheltering branches spread over head at the forest's edge but I am spent.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to the tiny life huddled inside me.

Episode 3: Coils of Enchantment

Fast on my heels, Lucia's enchantment coils into the form of a snake, its head poised to strike. It looms above me, blots out the moon, blots out the stars, blots out my last fragment of hope.

I fill my lungs, pull strength from the fertile earth beneath me, from the clear clean air of Highmoor Province, from the rushing water of Whispering River, from the raging fire inside the doomed castle.

In a fractured second, I weave a curse of my own and bind it with the magic of my ancestors, with the hatred of a hundred generations, with the essence of a thousand souls who cry for vengeance. One final blaze before the eternal cold of death. One killing strike before darkness descends.





The laws of the Universe say such a curse will be visited back on me ten times but I don't care. I will be the handmaiden of Hecate who makes sure Lucia pays. My child and I will not die alone.

"Goodbye, Maddock, my love," I whisper.

In the distance, the castle shimmers with heat. No trace of Maddock reaches me through the ether. He may be dead already. My heart speaks to the sleeping spirit within my womb.

"Goodbye sweet child. I might have named you Melody or Petunia or Lavender or Pearl or any of a thousand family names for victims of Lucia's dark magic. If the Universe grants us a new life, perhaps we will meet there."

A tingle of ice on my neck, a tremor in time, a subtle shift of energy rocks the ground, shudders in the murky, smoke-thick air. The curse perches on my tongue, but the will to speak withers into dust and blows away on a wintry gust.

The memory of ensorcelled paralysis pins me to the cold, hard ground. Trapped in the nightmare, my fingernails dig into the garden mud.

Episode 4: Down, down, down

From outside the vision, I watch myself fall. Feel again the vibration of Earth and air. Steel gray clouds boil in a tumultuous sky and smoky wind tears my hair. I can't breathe. Can't move. But Lucia is not the author of this numbing spell.

Her threatening hex twists its venomous head toward the castle. With an impotent sigh, it crumbles into black ash. It filters through my hair, coats my upturned face, but the malice it once held is dead.

In the distance, the castle blazes to phosphorescent blue lightening, each stone





etched into stark relief by an iridescent indigo flash. A pulse of energy, a thunderous blast, and New Castle Highmoor winks out leaving a black hole in the night.

Gone. Dissolved in the ether.

With light-blind eyes and bated breath, I wait, hope and dread in equal portions.

Did Maddock escaped? Or was Lucia victorious? My knees bleeding and my

heart pounding, I stagger toward the ghostly spiral of ozone marking the spot

the castle once stood. Shrubs loom from the darkness. Frightened night birds flutter across the path, call from the trees. What do they see that I do not?

Neither lover nor foe waits in the darkness. I blink like an owl in a flower-strewn meadow beneath a sky suddenly clear and calm and filled with stars and a westerly waning moon.

“Allium!” His cry echoes far away, far away, far away. The vision fades to black.

With a racking gasp, I return to the garden. Dream images sift into the air like dandelion seeds in a spring breeze. The cold mud has seeped through my skirt and the hard stems of dead weeds cut into my hands. The earthy, pungent scent of dirt and tomato leaves penetrates the lingering odor of smoke.

Episode 5: Everything Changed

Twice, Lucia blasted the Darkmore and La Croix families nearly into oblivion. I was very young the first time, the memory a blur of panic and fear and grief. A thousand years later, Maddock and I intended to lay old ghosts to rest.

We hoped the formal dinner to celebrate our marriage would be a first step toward healing the rifts between our two families. Time, we hoped, had eroded their ancient fears. Intoxicated by our own joy, we invited everyone: La Croixs and Darkmores, those who survived Lucia’s atrocity which fractured our families centuries be-





fore and the young ones who knew of such things only in legend.

My stately Celtic Darkmore relatives mixed with Maddock's New World La Croix family in an oddly familiar blend. I was only a child when Lucia destroyed Old Castle Highmoor and blew the alliance apart, but I remember peeping over the banister from the upper level of the old castle on a throng much like this one just before my world turned topsy-turvy.

New Castle Highmoor, erected on the ruins of the old castle, was a symbol of a new beginning. Nearly a thousand guests overflowed from the sumptuous drawing room of New Castle Highmoor to the elegant ballroom to the spacious veranda even spilled out into the verdant gardens. In the foyer, Maddock and I greeted each and every one.

Giggling cousins in brightly colored gowns cascaded down the steps into the garden, a bubbling tributary from the main concourse of matronly aunts wearing their finest brocades and portly uncles whose interests lay closer to the Scotch bottles and comfortable chairs in the drawing room. All afternoon and into the evening, they came. Some drove modern cars or opted for traditional horse drawn carriages—equally impressive to manage in this secluded region. Others dispensed with pretense and materialized from dramatically boiling clouds of smoke or, more festive, alighted from gauzy spheres of purple magic.

Many extended a blessing for an abundance of children to their greetings and a private smile passed between Maddock and me. Our secret would be common knowledge soon enough but for now it was a sweet and intimate bond only we shared.

On that night months ago, I listened to a thousand versions of "may you have a long life and much happiness", grasped a thousand hands in welcome, noted fear flickering behind a thousand smiles. A millennium had not erased the terror associated with this valley.

In our families, old habits die hard.





Episode 6: Fashionably Late

Fashionably late, Aunt Clarissa, the matriarch of my family, stepped regally from an elegant silver and gray coach drawn by four matched gray mares. Her burgundy brocade gown emphasized the gleaming green eyes and ivory skin for which we Darkmores are known. An onyx and diamond comb adorned her once blonde hair, now streaked with glittering strands of silver. Escorted by a young footman in sable livery, she ascended the seven steps to the broad veranda of Castle Highmoor and into the foyer like the queen she was. She extended a stiff hand to Maddock.

“A pleasure to welcome you to our home, Aunt,” he murmured his voice dripping with charm. His blue eyes twinkled as he solemnly raised her pale claw to his lips. “You’re by far the classiest dame here.”

She snatched her hand away, but not before a blush rose on her pallid cheeks. “‘Classy dame’ is not an acceptable term for a powerful sorceress such as myself. I’ll forgive it in light of the general festivities. But I’ll thank you not to call me ‘Aunt’, young man. At least, not in front of all these people. You’ll give them the impression I condone this union.”

I hugged her tight, despite her protestations. “They’ll never suspect a thing. It’s only been a millennium since the Darkmores and the La Croixs broke bread together. I doubt most of them know who is who.”

“Oh, they know. Watch them eye each other like hungry wolves. What’s the old saying—keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Lucia’s curse may have kept us separated in space, but even she can’t control everything.” Aunt Clarissa wriggled from my embrace and smoothed the brocade gown back in to place with perfectly manicured fingers. A satisfied smile curled her tinted lips. “And you two needn’t look so smug. Your little secret won’t be a secret for long. You’re not the first couple to achieve such a thing. Now, point me in the direction of Aurora La Croix. It’s been a thousand years since I laid eyes on her and I doubt





she's aged as well as I."

Aunt Clarissa cocked an elegant and knowing eyebrow at us as she swept into the drawing room where raven-tressed Aurora La Croix sipped blood-red wine amidst an admiring throng of La Croix cousins.

"I'm never sure if she likes me or if she is simply humoring her favorite niece," Maddock whispered. His lips close to my ear sent a delicious tremor down my neck.

"If anyone else called her 'a classy dame' she'd turn him into a fly and fill the room with spiders. She likes you, alright. But you are exceptionally ignorant in courtly manners. I blame America." I smoothed the collar of his velvet jacket, ran my hands down his arms, enjoyed the feel of taut muscles beneath the garment.

Black magic simmered in his cool, blue eyes. "Touch me like that again, and I'll be forced to carry you upstairs, courtly manners be damned."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled his face to mine. "Scandalous. What will Aunt Clarissa say?"

Episode 7: Goblets of Fine, Old Wine

Goblets of very fine and very old wine delivered by a young and slightly inebriated La Croix cousin put an end to any thoughts of a clandestine rendezvous upstairs. At last, the long road leading from the forest to the castle lay empty and it was time to toast and mingle among our disparate relations. The murmur of voices grew to a cheerful din as copious amounts of wine and Scotch flowed from crystal carafes. Our duties as host and hostess called. The moon peeped in the western windows of New Castle Highmoor before our circuits brought us back together on the veranda.





"I've spent the better part the evening either tracing my lineage back to satisfy your relatives or tracing yours to satisfy mine. I should put it in a scroll; Morgan begat Duncan and Duncan begat Caedmon and so on and so forth." Maddock sat his empty goblet on a handy tray and secured a full one in its place. "Do you ever wish we were normal human beings with short life spans and limited imaginations? At least it would spare us the intrigue of ancient curses and temperamental witches."

"If we were normal, we'd have been dead before we had a chance to meet again. I would remember you as a petulant pre-pubescent brat who thought it was funny to set the hair of elderly aunts on fire."

"And I would remember you as the little snitch who told on me. It was difficult to concentrate on Aunt Clarissa's lecture when her hair was still smoking. It's my last fond memory of the Time Before."

"Lucky for you Lucia stole the spotlight, or Aunt Clarissa would have thought up a proper punishment."

A chill ran the length of my spine, prickling the hair on my arms and my neck. The festive lights, the chatter of conversation, the smell of a sumptuous dinner, and the subtle electromagnetic pull of the earth mirrored perfectly the night of Lucia's Curse.





